gameinformer®
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

THE OUTER WORLDS

A new universe from the original creators of Fallout

NAME
Sigmund W.

OCCUPATION
Crab Fisherman

GENRE
Platformers/Puzzle Games

HANDLE
CaptainCatchEm0035

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Transition Transmission

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

I came into 2019 concerned we might be approaching a console-generation transition. Sometimes during the changeover, game companies hold back some games or target them for a later window so they can ride the wave of marketing that tends to go along with new hardware launches, thus making years that really should be best in a console's lifespan sputter out. Remember those lackluster final years of Wii U?

Perhaps I was overthinking it, as the PC, the home consoles, and the Switch are all humming with promising content with no signs of stopping. While we don't have a roadmap for the entire year yet, it seems like every other day, we get another exciting announcement, including the game we have on our cover this month, The Outer Worlds. That's just one of the many new experiences set to dazzle us this year. We highlight even more in our Most Exciting Games of 2019 feature on page 60.

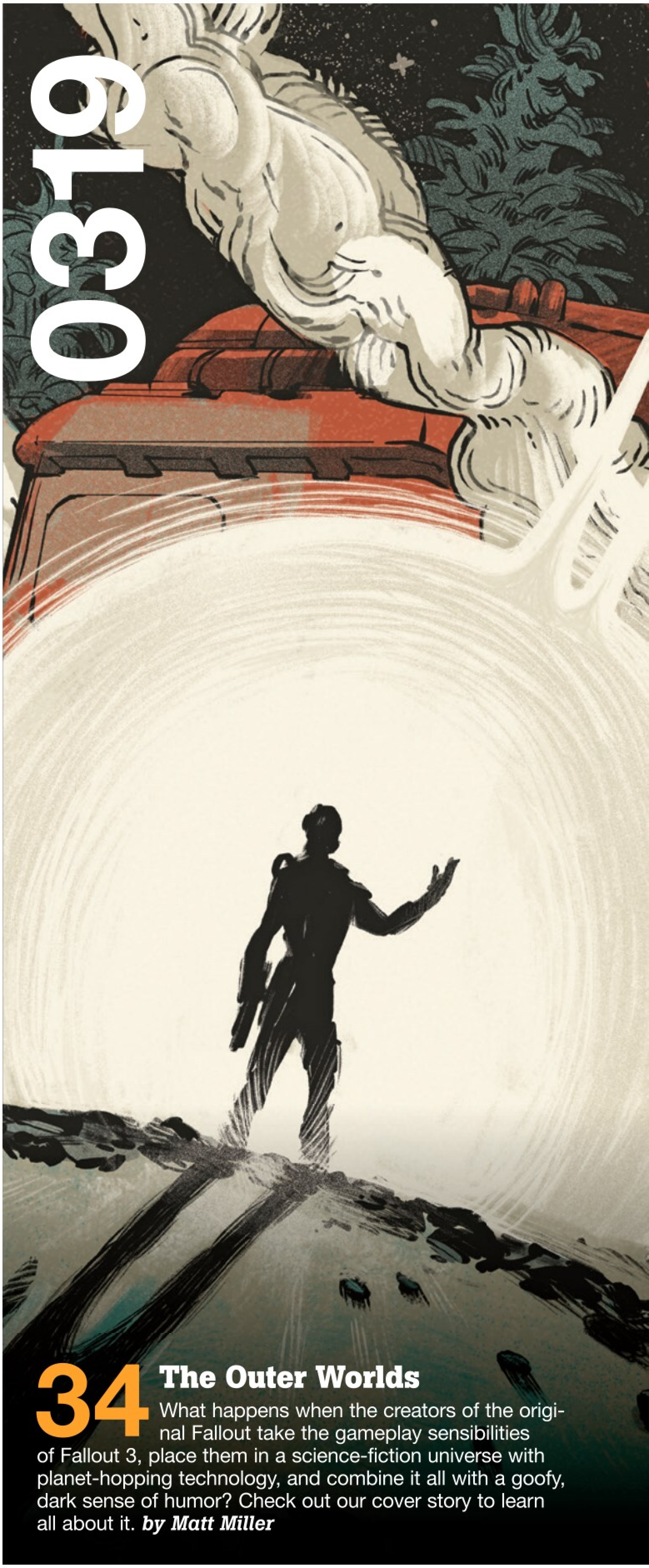
That said, at some point in the near future we will see a new generation of consoles, or a change in the way games are played. Streaming is often talked about, as every game company out there wants to be the "Netflix of games." I personally think having local software is the way to go, as I have yet to try a service that doesn't have some amount of unforgivable lag that ruins the experience for some of my favorite types of games. I hope the race to get new hardware in place doesn't create a moment where platform holders outthink themselves and the consoles launch before they are ready.

Whichever direction the new hardware goes, one thing brings me solace: Game consoles are less about custom chips these days and more about custom experiences. They follow a more standardized PC architecture, which means developers can focus more on their games and less on their destinations. Leaving games less influenced by the console generations hopefully leads to a more consistent stream of games that aren't subject to the whims of the platform holders.

I look forward to whatever direction hardware takes us next, but I always love the end of console generations best. This is the time when the games show what the hardware is truly capable of, and tend to be where the game developers deliver their best work. From the looks of it, 2019 is going to a real showcase for what current platforms can do.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



34 **The Outer Worlds**
What happens when the creators of the original Fallout take the gameplay sensibilities of Fallout 3, place them in a science-fiction universe with planet-hopping technology, and combine it all with a goofy, dark sense of humor? Check out our cover story to learn all about it. ***by Matt Miller***

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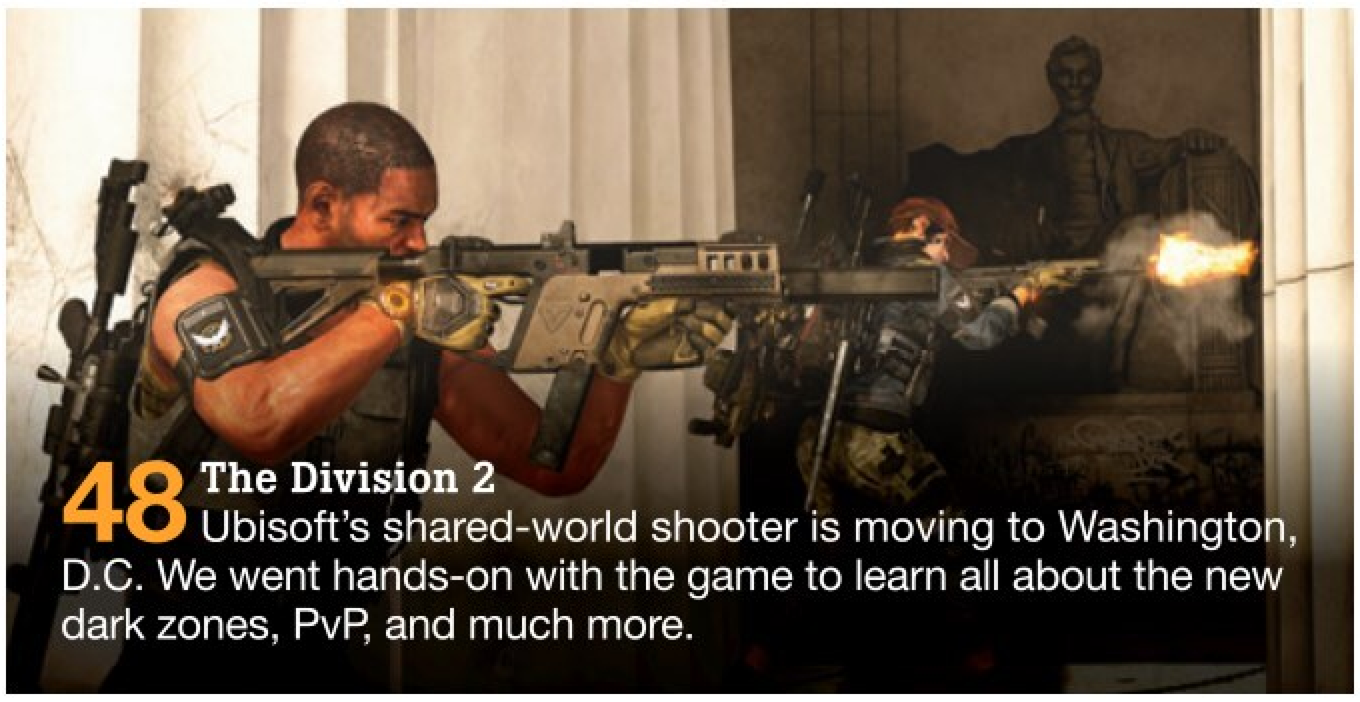

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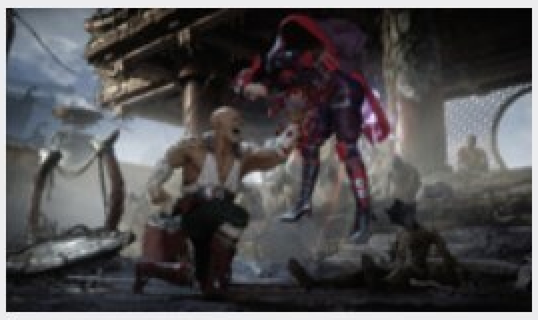

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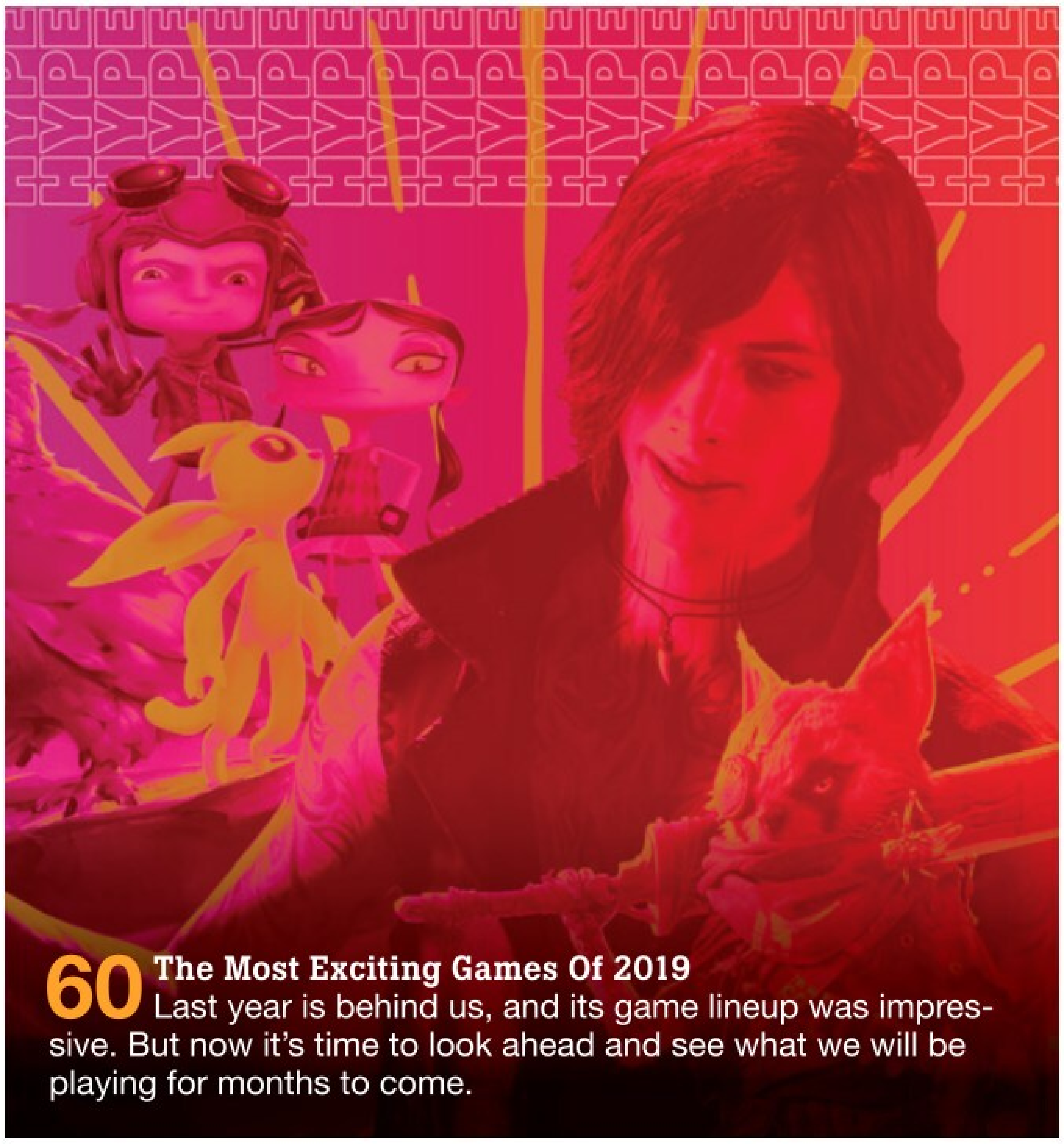

60 **The Most Exciting Games Of 2019** Last year is behind us, and its game lineup was impressive. But now it's time to look ahead and see what we will be playing for months to come.

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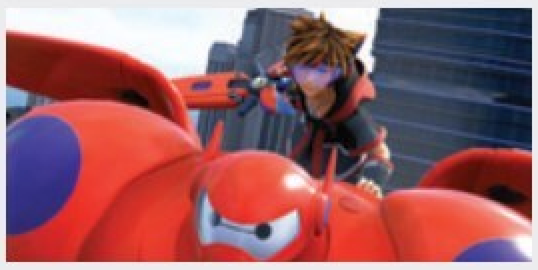

88 **Kingdom Hearts III** We've been waiting years to see what's next for Sora and pals on a home console. Is it good? Does it all make sense?

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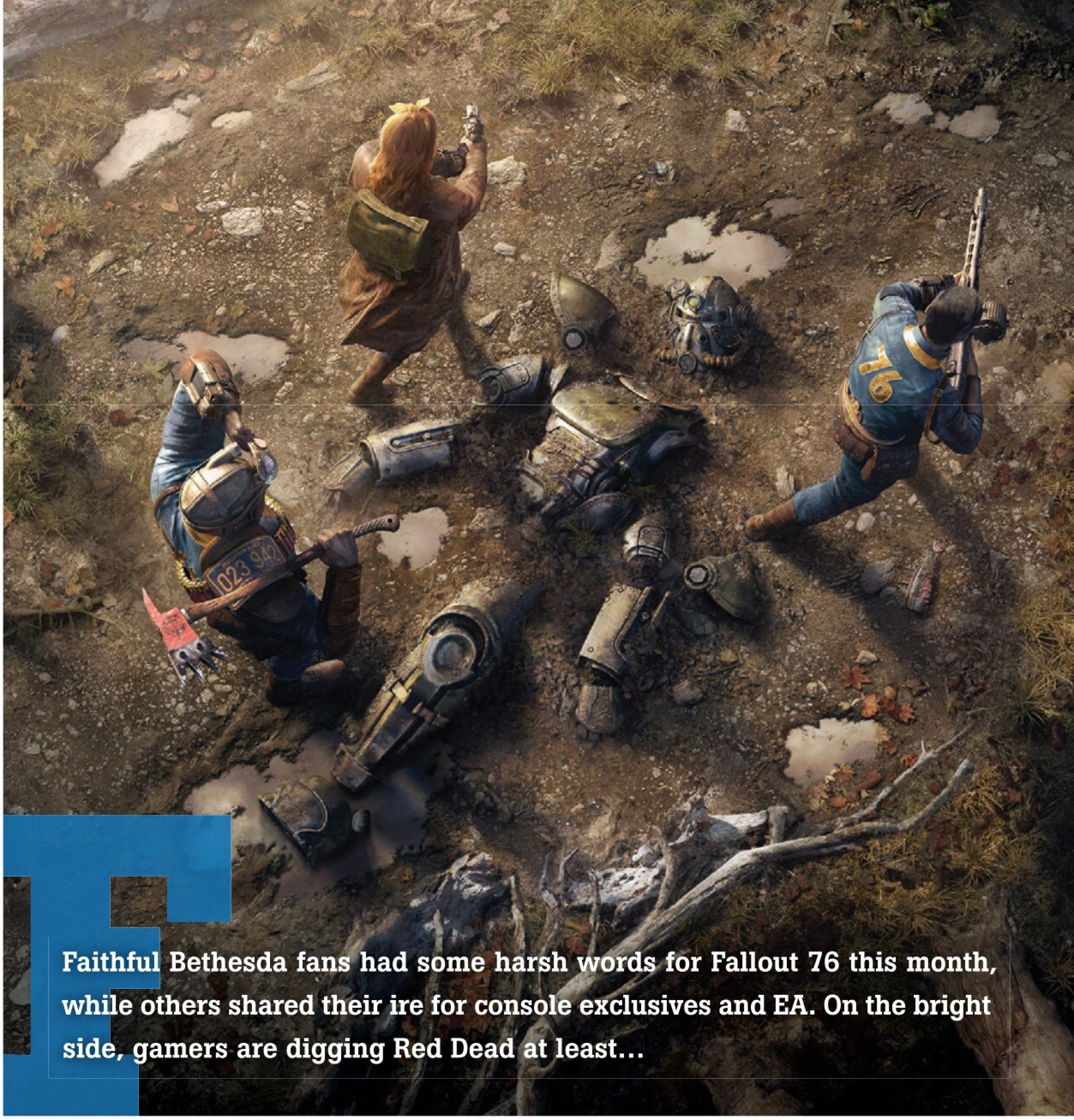


Faithful Bethesda fans had some harsh words for Fallout 76 this month, while others shared their ire for console exclusives and EA. On the bright side, gamers are digging Red Dead at least…

Fallout Over Fallout

I am a 52-year-old gamer and have been playing since the advent of Pong. One of the most significant gaming experiences of my life was playing Fallout 3. When I stepped out of the vault for the first time into the ruins of Washington, D.C., and ran across familiar places and settings that were now rubble, I was profoundly moved. Fallout 4 and New Vegas provided me with similar if slightly less potent experiences. I think my emotional reaction to these games is what makes me such a huge fan, and I have gone back and replayed all of them at least once. My game room is even Fallout-themed. Based on these experiences, I had high hopes for Fallout 76, and I must say I have never been so disappointed in a game. Setting aside all the bugs, I have found myself feeling completely bored and ambiguous about the whole game. There is absolutely nothing that draws me in and makes me want to keep playing. To me Fallout 76 feels flat and emotionless. They have taken out all the things that made the previous games great and left us with a lot of window dressing and not much substance. Bethesda really missed the boat on this one.

Matt Brown
Parsonsburg, Maryland

Your review of Fallout 76 was spot on! I am a 71-year-old diehard Fallout player from the Xbox 360 days up to the present. I have logged over 700 hours in Fallout 4, and I was really anticipating this new release. What a disheartening shot in the behind. Bethesda has totally duped us. I am regretting that I purchased the pre-release package – talk about $80 down the drain. If there was some sort of progress, I could see a point, but the game just keeps crashing and keeps screwing up my C.A.M.P. every time I move it. I'm just getting sick of it. Each new patch seems to do nothing. I actually started laughing yesterday after I was kicked off the server the fourth time. Geez! I am so sick of this game's issues. I could go on for pages, but this is enough. Thanks for the good review.

Phil Dunlop
via email

We heard from a large number of irate Fallout fans this month who were ready to stomp right back into Vault 76 and slam the door. Even if Bethesda can iron out 76's post-apocalyptic problems, the developer has some serious fence-mending to do to appease its community. Cynics and trolls are one thing, but when your decade-plus super fans are the ones slinging the insults, you know something is wrong.

Contact Us

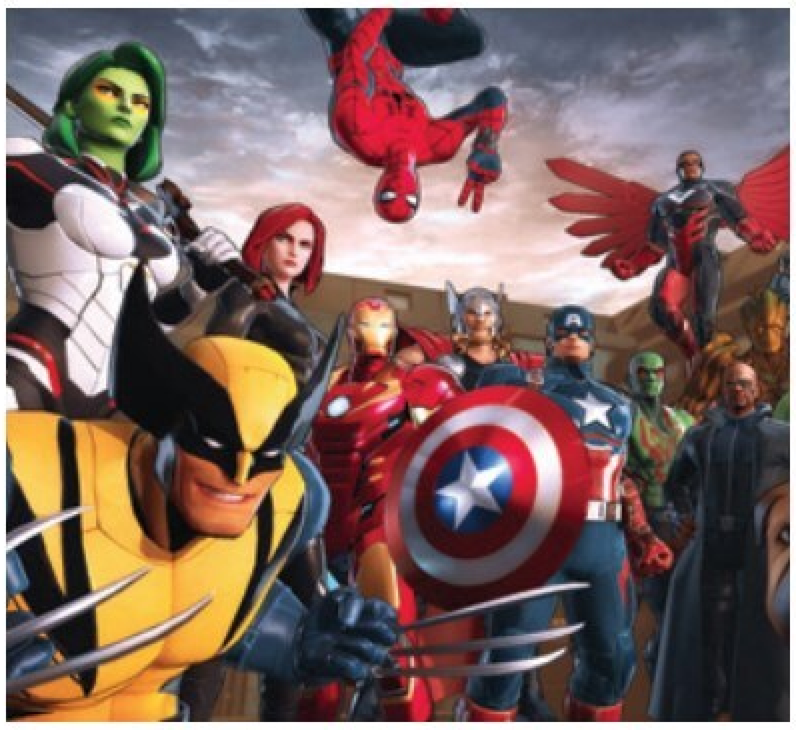
Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Unanticipated Alliance

I write to you dismayed and distraught. For 10 years I have hoped that a Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 announcement would one day be a reality, without even a hint or tease that it was possible. Then out of the blue, MUA 3 is announced at the Game Awards, but only as a Nintendo Switch exclusive! What?! The third game that would complete the trilogy and it's only on Switch? The first two weren't console exclusives, so why the heck would MUA 3 be one – and on Switch of all systems? That seems like a very bad business decision. How many Switch owners are there compared to PS4 or Xbox One? I am salivating to play this game, but I can assure you and Nintendo that I am not going to buy a new console for just one game. Add this to my list as yet another reason to hate Nintendo.

Rick Blair
via email

While the announcement of Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3's Switch exclusivity was certainly a surprise (and an unwelcome one to those who don't own the system), the deal isn't as outlandish as it may first appear. As last year's Spider-Man proved, Marvel is more than happy to strike exclusive deals with companies for its properties, and Team Ninja, who is developing MUA 3, has a good working history with Nintendo after providing assistance on Fire Emblem Warriors and Hyrule Warriors. Sometimes it's all about who you know.



Oh, EA...

I just got done reading Matt Bertz's op-ed (EA's Astonishing Run Of Brand Blunders Needs To Stop, issue 309) and couldn't agree more. EA has always had an issue with dropping the ball when it comes to their huge assortment of franchises. Series like Dead Space, The Sims, and even Command & Conquer are all shells of their former selves because of EA's mismanagement. Every time EA thinks it's hit a gold mine, they try to nuke the whole damn mountain to get to it. Hopefully EA sees this as a wakeup call to learn and grow from their mistakes, and not just run from them.

Will Schaefer
via email

I agree that EA and DICE should be in trouble. Most of their games are geared toward multiplayer, leaving those of us who don't play online paying for short campaigns. Let's face it, 60 bucks is a lot of money to pay for something that only takes about 10 hours to play. And if you buy digital, you're stuck with a game you can't get rid of. I will never buy one of their games again.

Mike Dombrowski
Plainfield, IL

Bertz's point wasn't that EA *should* be in trouble for their previous mistakes, but rather that he hopes they'll fix them moving forward. And if EA does, they deserve the support – there's no reason to punish good, consumer-friendly games and developers with a boycott based on a grudge. The simple approach is still the best: Support the games you like, and skip the ones you don't.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Are they going to release a new Zelda soon?"

Nintendo only has like three characters, so probably.

"Am I the only one who really wants to see a Jazz Jackrabbit reboot?"

For the last time, Cliff, YES.

"Do you guys ever see a Chakan: The Forever Man remake happening?"

Nothing in this crazy world would surprise us anymore.

Wait For It...

"Please guys send help, I can't figure what Hallie Verdeck's drawing is supposed to be! It's killing me!"

Since you've patiently waited two months for an answer, we'll tell you: It's the end fight from Uncharted 4!

Question Of The Month:

What 2019 game are you looking forward to playing the most, and why?

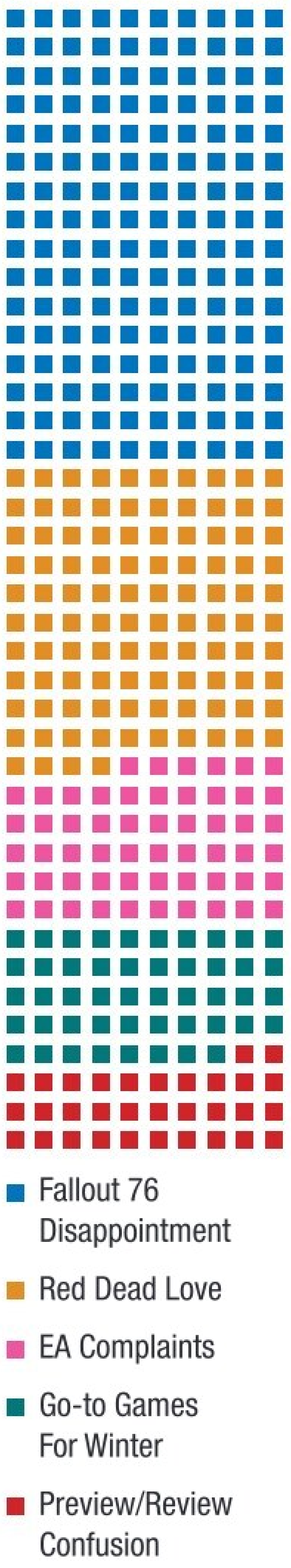
gi spy

(Left) This month, Obsidian Entertainment's Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain, and Feargus Urquhart spilled the space beans on their upcoming sci-fi RPG The Outer Worlds.

(Right) What better way to soak up all the history and culture of Tokyo than visiting…Disneyland?

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Baby, It's Cold Outside

In issue 309, we asked gamers what is their favorite game to play during the winter. It was a slow month, alright? Thankfully, some snowed-in readers still responded to our query.

Every year when the temps drop, I dust off (literally) my still-functional PS2 and fire up the best winter sports game ever made: SSX3. The game is ridiculously fun, modular, has a forgiving learning curve, and still stands the test of time. Not to mention the soundtrack still reigns as one of the best, eclectic mixes in games.

Andrew Sulgit

My favorite game for those cold winter nights is a good, long RPG. Something I can really lose myself in. This has been a yearly tradition for me since 2008 when I got The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion for the 360. Fallout 3, Skyrim, GTAV, Pokémon Moon, and now RDR II have kept me busy over the years.

Royce Miller

I like playing RPG and adventures games during the winter months, especially open-world games. When I have snow days I appreciate a game that can consume all my extra time, like Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

Josh Bishop

Redemption For Red Dead

I believe you guys made the right choice giving Red Dead Redemption II a 10 out of 10. Even though it does have minor flaws, they are completely overshadowed by the depth and dedication Rockstar put into the game. I am a first responder with a family so my time for gaming is very limited, but Red Dead II has hit all the marks for me as a gamer. It has a great story. It's incredibly detailed. And it has enough side activities to keep me going for months in between life. I've always enjoyed Grand Theft Auto and I was a major fan of the original Red Dead Redemption, but Rockstar has more than proven themselves this time. Red Dead II sets a new bar for open-world games, especially when it comes to detail. Even my wife who is not a gamer and couldn't care less about them was incredibly impressed.

Steven Johnson
via email

We're glad you enjoyed our review and the game so much, Steven – be sure to come back next month when readers complain about how Red Dead II fared in our Top 50 awards! We're *super* looking forward to it.

(Left) This month we said goodbye to the dynamic intern duo of John-Paul Gemborys and Jill Grodt. Thanks for all your hard work, guys! **(Right)** You know it's a good party when League of Geeks co-founder Trent Kusters and Funomena CEO Robin Hunicke show up!

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(continued on page 8)

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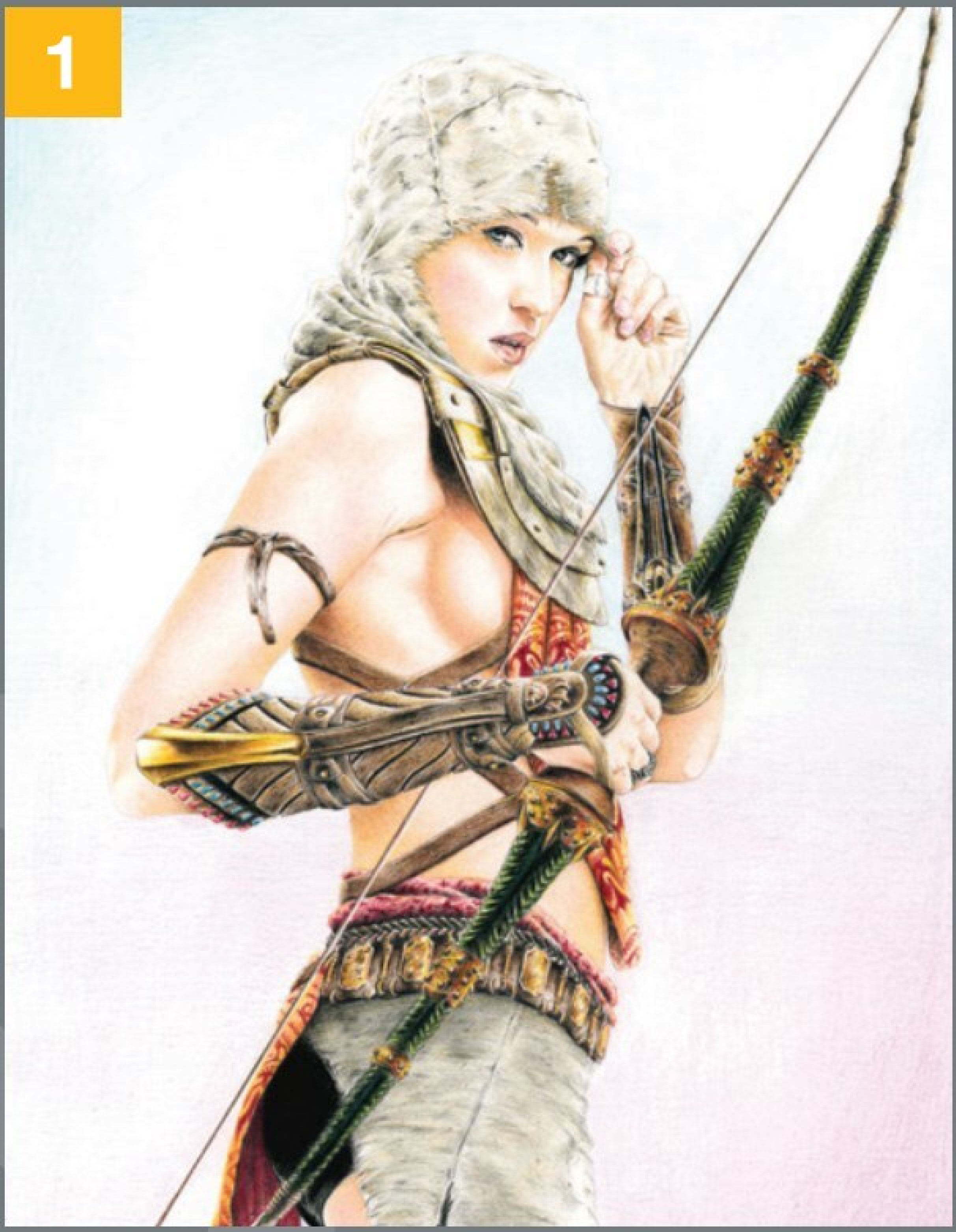
gallery



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WINNER

1 BJ Fletcher

Good grief, has no one heard of a little lifesaving invention called "armor" before?!

2 Jordan Watson, Age 12

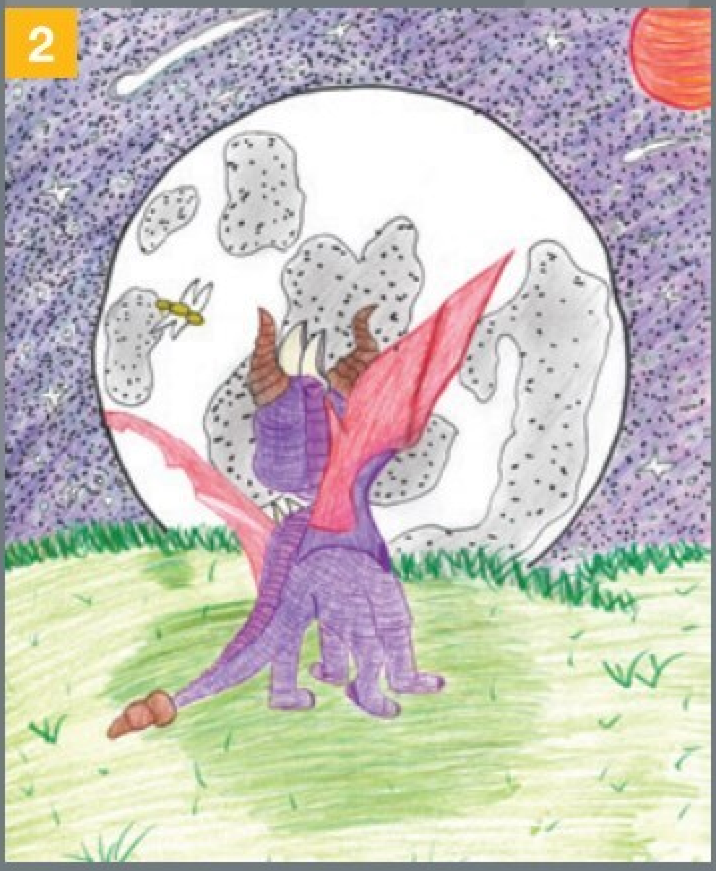
Luke Skywalker ain't got nothing on Spyro's wistful moon staring. At least we assume he's wistful. Hard to tell from behind, really.

3 Lylah Davis, Age 8

Those chef cats are the most memorable part of Monster Hunter, to be honest.

4 Kaitlynn Parker

Ugh, we get it, D.Va, you like hearts!



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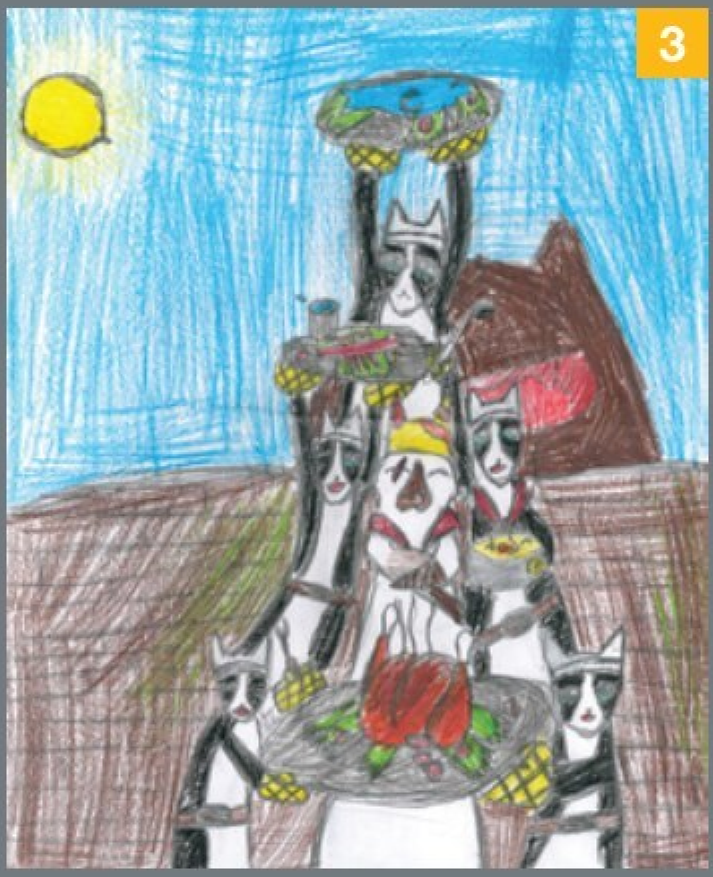

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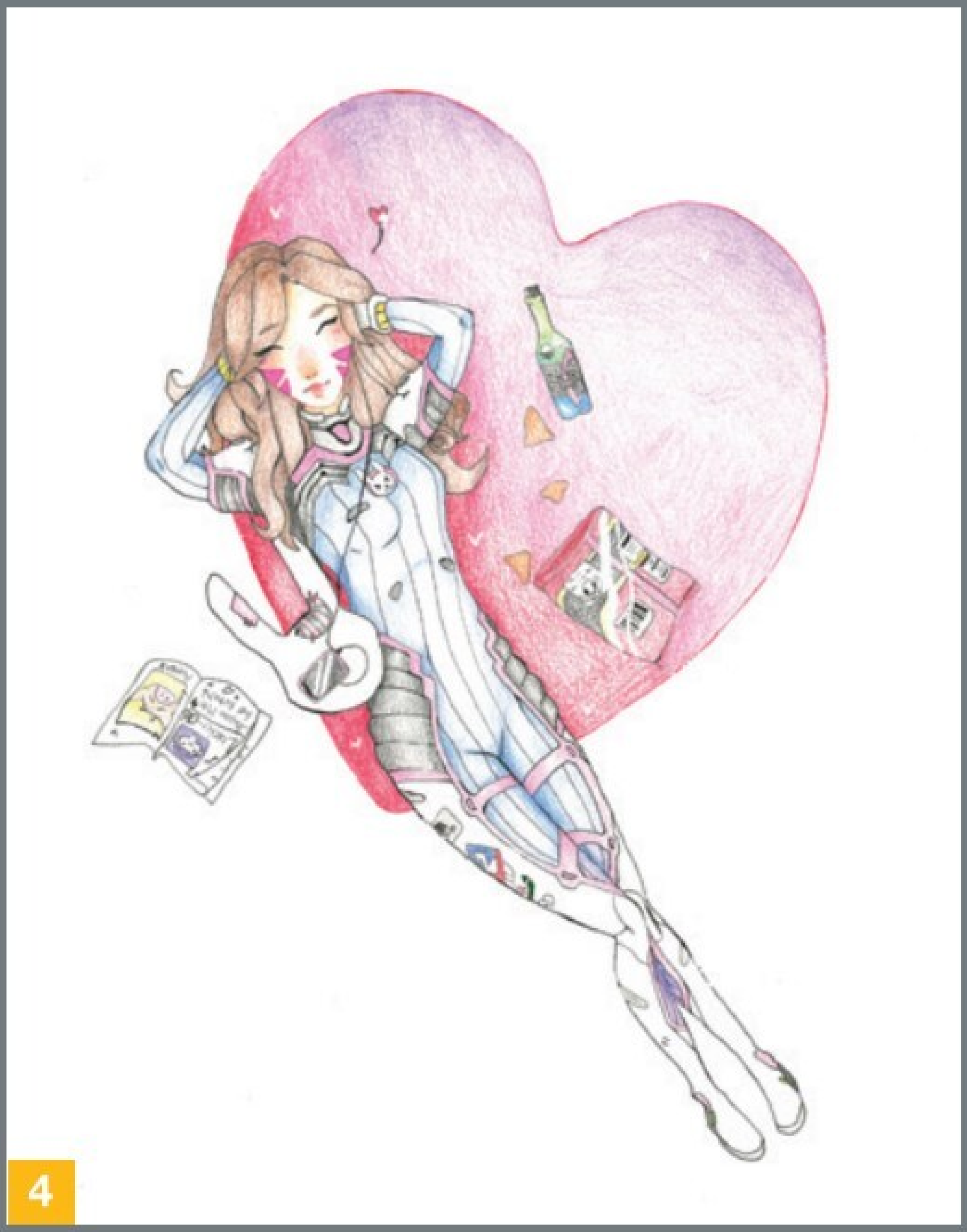

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(Left) The same is true with Microsoft's Chris Charla, Media Molecule's Abbie Heppe, and Wedbush Securities' Michael Pachter. **(Right)** We're not sure how Leo ended up on top of a saddle in a Swedish dungeon, but we really don't want to know anyway.

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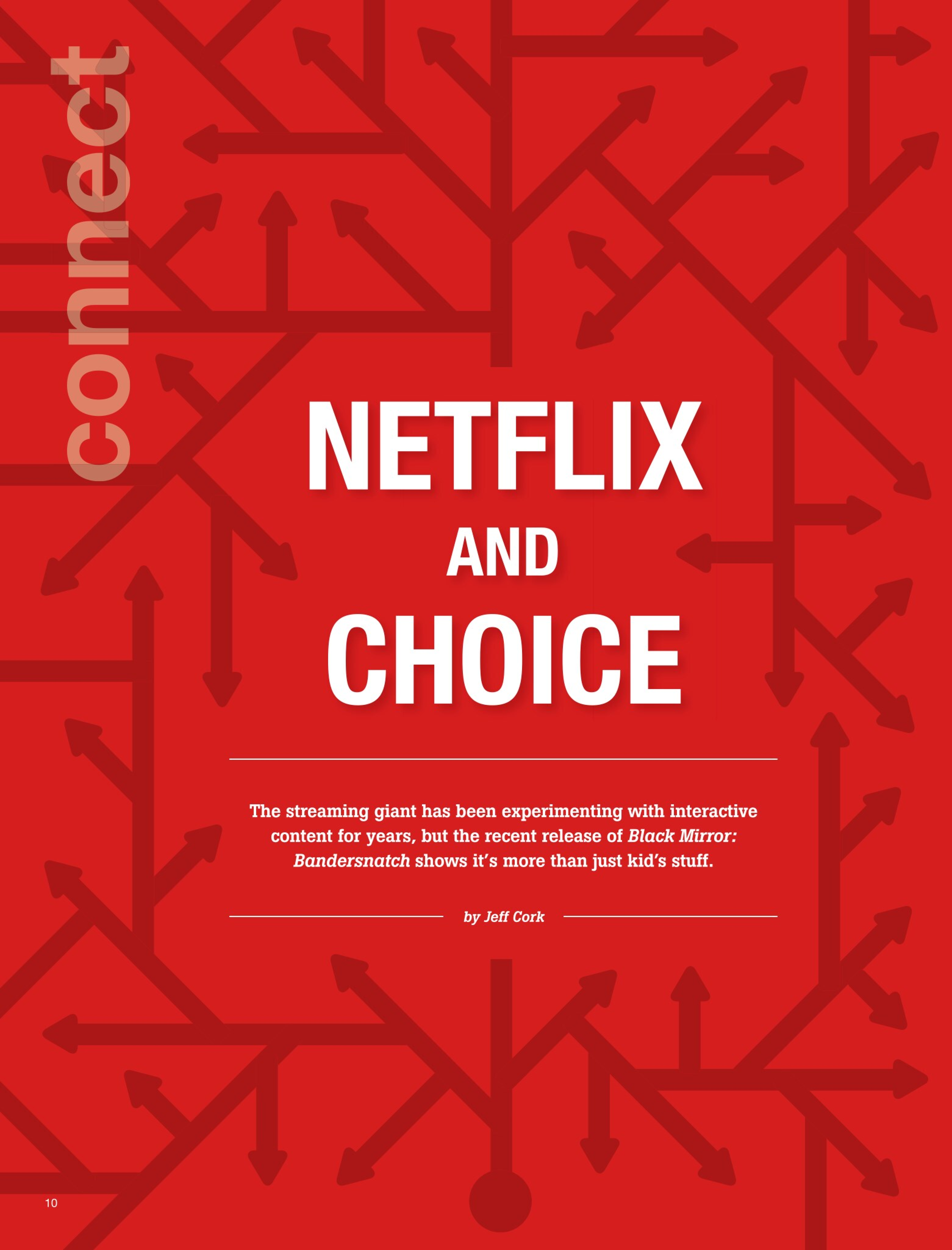
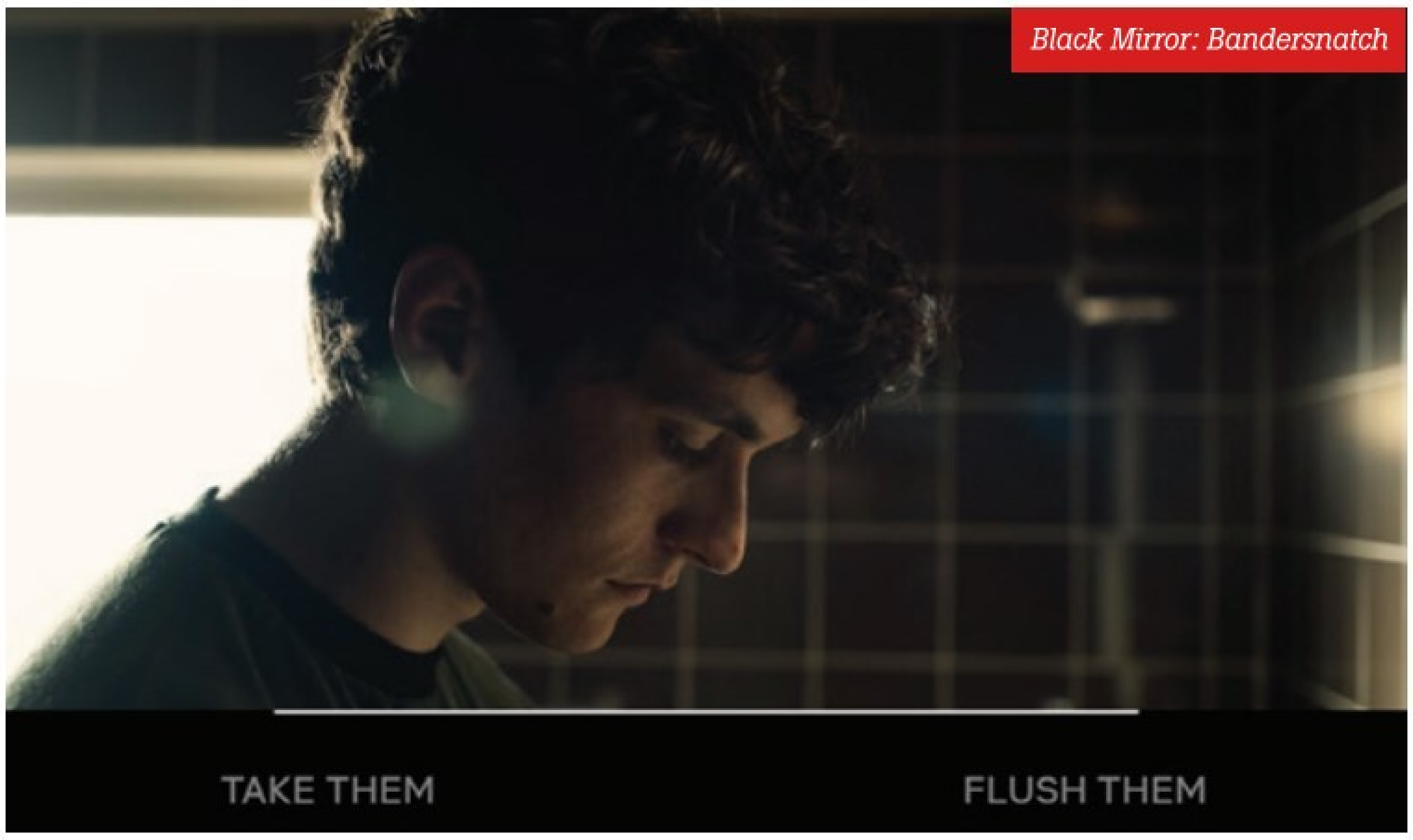


NETFLIX AND CHOICE

The streaming giant has been experimenting with interactive content for years, but the recent release of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* shows it's more than just kid's stuff.

by Jeff Cork

It's a common phenomenon: You settle in for an evening of TV, and you're paralyzed by the abundance of options. Are you in the mood for something new and surprising? Something funny? Something serious? Maybe it's time to binge on the show your friends won't stop yammering about. Or you could just rewatch *The Office*. Again. Viewers who recently made the decision to check out the latest episode of *Black Mirror* on Netflix quickly had to come to terms with the fact that pressing play was just the beginning.


Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

In *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, viewers follow a young computer programmer named Stefan Butler. It's 1984, and Butler wants to adapt his favorite book, *Bandersnatch*, into a computer game. *Bandersnatch*, the fictional book, is similar to a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, in that readers make decisions as they progress through the story, which in turn lead them on different paths. Similarly, Netflix viewers have to choose from various options throughout the special episode of the show in a popup interface. These decisions can be mundane, such as the kind of breakfast cereal the main character eats, to more impactful ones, like whether you should accept a job or attack your father.

Since it's *Black Mirror*, technology and social malaise factor into the story, and Butler (and viewers) have to navigate a world where either very strange things are happening, Butler is going crazy, or – perhaps most unsettling – some combination of the two.

Thanks to *Black Mirror*'s popularity and name recognition, it quickly grabbed headlines as something worth experiencing. While it may have benefitted from word-of-mouth buzz from its intended audience, *Bandersnatch* wasn't Netflix's first interactive release. Just weeks before, an adaptation of Telltale Games' Minecraft Story Mode appeared on the service. Some of the gameplay was pared down for the platform, but it provided a fairly faithful recreation of the original release. You can trace *Bandersnatch* even further back, however, to June 2017. That's when Netflix's first interactive project, *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Fairy Tale* was released.

Several years ago, Carla Engelbrecht, director of product innovation at Netflix, was thinking about how to use its existing streaming technology to create content that was more engaging for kids. Working with Todd Yellin, VP of product at Netflix, they decided to approach Dreamworks to see if the studio would be interested in creating something interactive. The result was the special *Puss in Book* episode, where the main character is sucked into a storybook. At regular intervals the narrator asks viewers what Puss should do next, whereupon the action freezes and the choice is made via mouse click, press of the remote, or tap on the screen. At that point, the action resumes according to the decision.

In addition to fulfilling their goal of creating something that young viewers would like, *Puss in Book* served as a proof of concept for more adult-oriented content moving forward. "The way we talk about it sometimes is if this didn't work with kids, there was no way it was going to work with adults," Engelbrecht says. "We wanted to see how it worked for them, and it gave us a way to build out the technology, make sure the technology would work the way that we thought it would."

Shortly before *Puss in Book* launched, Engelbrecht says the Netflix team was excited. "We were feeling good about how everything was coming together. We wanted to start talking about what it could mean to

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Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Fairy Tale

do it for adults, knowing that these projects take time.” A group met with the *Black Mirror* team in May 2017, and essentially showed show creator Charlie Brooker and executive producer Annabel Jones what their technology could do. “We wanted to plant that seed and see what he wanted to do with it, and he came back about a month later with an idea that ultimately became *Bandersnatch*.”

Since *Puss in Book*’s release, the technology has become more refined. Unlike the start/stop pacing of that earlier work, *Bandersnatch*’s action flows smoothly between decisions, with video continuing to play as viewers make their choices. The overall structure of *Bandersnatch* is much more complicated, too, with multiple narrative loops and several different possible endings. One of the things Netflix is still working through is how to help create stories that appeal to people who want to engage with interactive content once versus those who want to dive in several times.

“We’re still learning – very much so,” Engelbrecht says. “We discuss it pretty frequently: How many people are completionists and they want to see all of the bits? And how many people are happy to go back and make different choices and see what they uncover? And how do we build the experience so that it addresses both? We’ve been running some A/B tests with *Bandersnatch* to try to help us understand, because we don’t have the answer yet.”

Bandersnatch’s narrative acknowledges some of that push/pull in a clever way: When viewers choose to retry something after getting a fail state, they don’t have to watch the previous video in its entirety. Instead, it’s a series of flash cuts that show, for instance, Butler brushing his teeth, eating, and moving on with his day versus the step-by-step accounts that were initially shown. “That came in later in the script-writing process,” Engelbrecht says. “That recap sort of *Groundhog’s Day* feel was not there right away, and the first draft that it showed up in we were like, ‘Yes! That’s it!’ It’s been fun, because we’re all exploring and learning how to tell these stories together.”

Netflix doesn’t provide viewing numbers for most of its programming, so it’s impossible to say how *Bandersnatch* and its other interactive programming has performed. Engelbrecht says the team has been happy with the results, however, and (as you might expect) that viewers have been returning to these interactive shows more than their linear counterparts. They’re not ready to provide specifics at this point, but Netflix is in continuing talks to bring more interactive shows to the platform.

“We knew it was going to be great fun to see how people were engaging with it, and also seeing how creators want to tell these stories,” she says. “That’s the thing I’m most proud of now; we’ve opened up another toolset for creators. Whether they’re traditional linear video storytellers or game-based storytellers, we’ve opened another platform or distribution model for these stories to be told and seeing what types of stories folks are interested in telling.”

What Else Is Out There?

Netflix is investing more in its interactive projects, but it’s not the only game in town. Here’s a quick rundown of what some of the other major streaming-video providers are doing in the space.

YOUTUBE

YouTube was an early home for interactive video, with a variety of branching narratives to explore. Thanks to clever use of the platform’s annotations feature, text overlays could be added (and clicked on) to link viewers to different videos, allowing for viewer choice. Unfortunately, annotations didn’t play well on mobile, and Google removed the functionality in favor of similar but more restrictive alternatives. Annotation support permanently ended in January 2019, so if you find one of these old videos, no amount of clicking will let you continue their tales.

AMAZON

If you’re looking for a *Choose Your Own Adventure*-like experience on Amazon, you’d best stick with the book department. While the company has been investing in game development and publishing, it doesn’t appear to be as interested in exploring the world of interactive video, at least not in a straight narrative form. Amazon Game Studios’ The Grand Tour Game incorporates video footage from the Amazon original series, but the interactivity in this digitally released game comes via driving segments that PlayStation 4 and Xbox One players play like a traditional racing game. Football fans can access stats, additional play-by-play options, and other info during Amazon’s *Thursday Night Football* broadcasts as well, but they’ll need to have a Fire TV device.

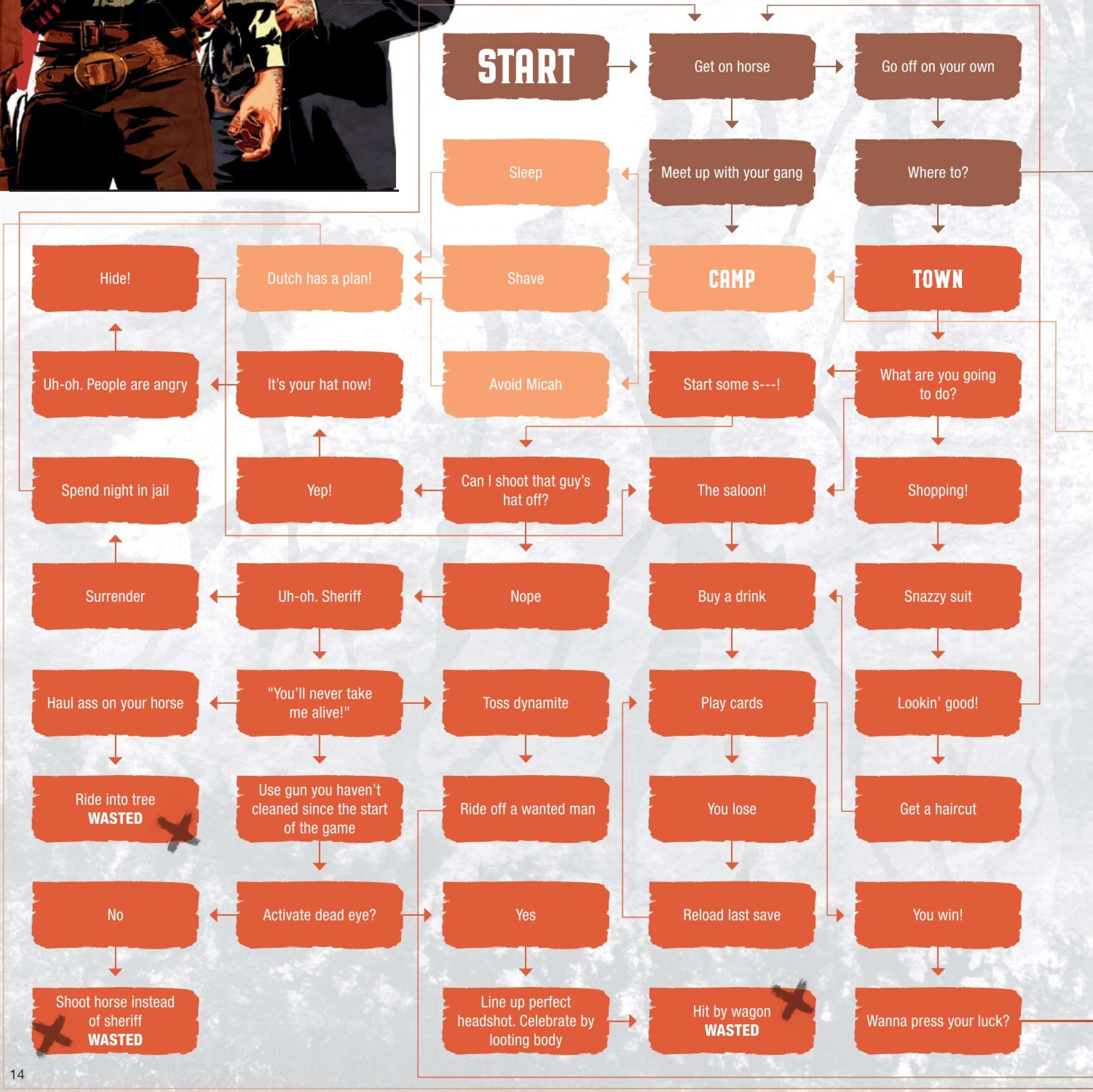
HULU

Hulu subscribers can access at least one interactive video, which comes in an unexpected format: virtual reality. The Hulu VR comedy *Door No. 1* lets viewers make choices as they navigate an awkward high-school class reunion. The first episode of the series was released last May. “We are always exploring various different types of content formats and interactivity,” a Hulu spokesperson told us, adding that the company doesn’t have anything further to announce at this point.

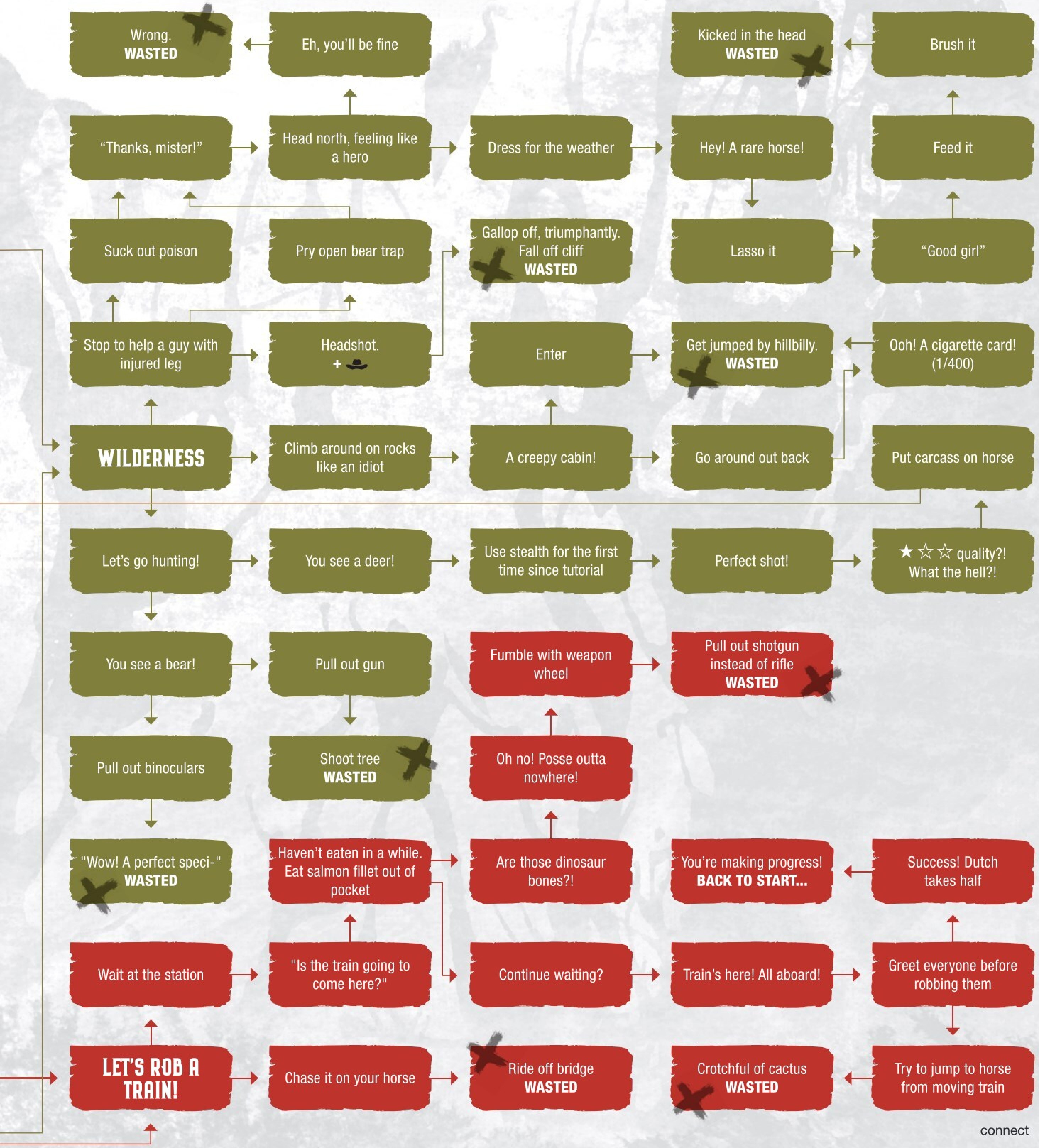
HOW TO PLAY

This flowchart game will give you a complete experience of being an outlaw in a sprawling open world

by Andrew Reiner & Jeff Cork


START
Get on horse
Go off on your own
Sleep
Meet up with your gang
Where to?
Hide!
Dutch has a plan!
Shave
CAMP
TOWN
Uh-oh. People are angry
It's your hat now!
Avoid Micah
Start some s---!
What are you going to do?
Spend night in jail
Yep!
Can I shoot that guy's hat off?
The saloon!
Shopping!
Surrender
Uh-oh. Sheriff
Nope
Buy a drink
Snazzy suit
Haul ass on your horse
"You'll never take me alive!"
Toss dynamite
Play cards
Lookin' good!
Ride into tree
WASTED
Use gun you haven't cleaned since the start of the game
Ride off a wanted man
You lose
Get a haircut
No
Activate dead eye?
Yes
Reload last save
You win!
Shoot horse instead of sheriff
WASTED
Line up perfect headshot. Celebrate by looting body
Hit by wagon
WASTED
Wanna press your luck?

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II


Wrong.
WASTED
Eh, you'll be fine
Kicked in the head
WASTED
Brush it
"Thanks, mister!"
Head north, feeling like a hero
Dress for the weather
Hey! A rare horse!
Feed it
Suck out poison
Pry open bear trap
Gallop off, triumphantly. Fall off cliff
WASTED
Lasso it
"Good girl"
Stop to help a guy with injured leg
Headshot.
+ 🎩
Enter
Get jumped by hillbilly.
WASTED
Ooh! A cigarette card! (1/400)
WILDERNESS
Climb around on rocks like an idiot
A creepy cabin!
Go around out back
Put carcass on horse
Let's go hunting!
You see a deer!
Use stealth for the first time since tutorial
Perfect shot!
★ ☆ ☆ quality?! What the hell?!
You see a bear!
Pull out gun
Fumble with weapon wheel
Pull out shotgun instead of rifle
WASTED
Pull out binoculars
Shoot tree
WASTED
Oh no! Posse outta nowhere!
"Wow! A perfect speci-"
WASTED
Haven't eaten in a while. Eat salmon fillet out of pocket
Are those dinosaur bones?!
You're making progress!
BACK TO START...
Success! Dutch takes half
Wait at the station
"Is the train going to come here?"
Continue waiting?
Train's here! All aboard!
Greet everyone before robbing them
LET'S ROB A TRAIN!
Chase it on your horse
Ride off bridge
WASTED
Crotchful of cactus
WASTED
Try to jump to horse from moving train

Nancy Drew
MORE FRIEND
PS4
JOURNEY
SEGA SATURN
PlayStation 2
HALO 5

Her Stories

Inspiring women in the game industry

By Ben Reeves

Left to Right: Megan Gaiser, Bonnie Ross, Jennifer MacLean, Dona Bailey, Brenda Laurel, Susan Jaekel, Sheri Graner Ray, Victoria Van Voorhis, Amy Hennig

T

The Strong National Museum of Play's new Women in Games exhibit opens with a pair of contrasting statistics: 48 percent of video game participants are female,* but only 23 percent of video game makers are female.** This imbalance is a testament to the fact that the game industry hasn't always been a welcoming space. The Strong's sobering exhibit opener highlights inequality, but the rest of its showcase offers hope to burgeoning game makers and fans alike.

"We like to pick a word or two that encompasses the theme of our exhibits and what we want to do with them," says the Strong's curator Shannon Symonds. "I picked the word 'Inspire,' because more than anything else I want to inspire the next generation, specifically the female generation, and show them that they have amazing role models. That women have been here since the inception of the industry, and when they face opposition or bullying, they can persevere."

The Women in Games exhibit tells the story of many under-appreciated women who have shaped the video game industry and created some of its most beloved games. The space explores the various roles women have assumed in the industry, from programming to sound design to managing entire publishing companies. Old game-design documents and concept art sit next to profiles on industry leaders like Jennifer Hale, Yoko Shimomura, and Roberta Williams.

For patrons, the exhibit is hard to miss. Situated in the center of the Strong's facility, attendees must walk through the Women in Games exhibit to reach the back half of the museum, which includes the Strong's popular Toy Hall of Fame. "We decided we wanted this in a place where people are forced to walk through it," says Symonds. "You can't miss it. We definitely did that deliberately."

"There's a perception, especially in terms of making money, that the industry has to make games that resonate with the core audience of young male gamers," continues Symonds. "That tends to make it harder for women to feel like they belong in the industry. Even if you're a gamer, you might not know about the many contributions women have made to your favorite games – even traditionally male-dominated games like Halo. And I wonder, do people know that company is run by a woman?"

In honor of those immeasurable contributions and the work women put into the game industry, we take a closer look at a representative handful of the developers who are featured in the Strong's exhibit. These are just some of the women who have created virtual worlds, but their stories can inspire us all.

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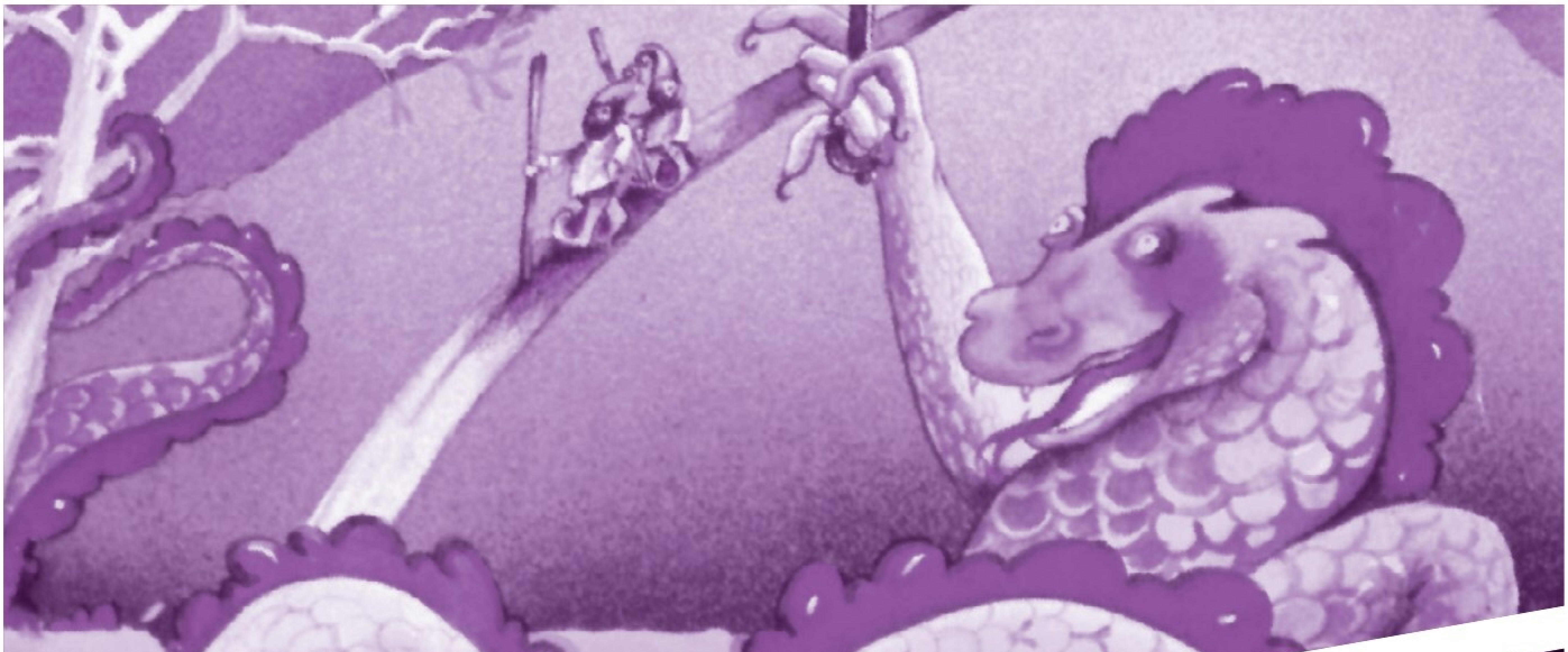
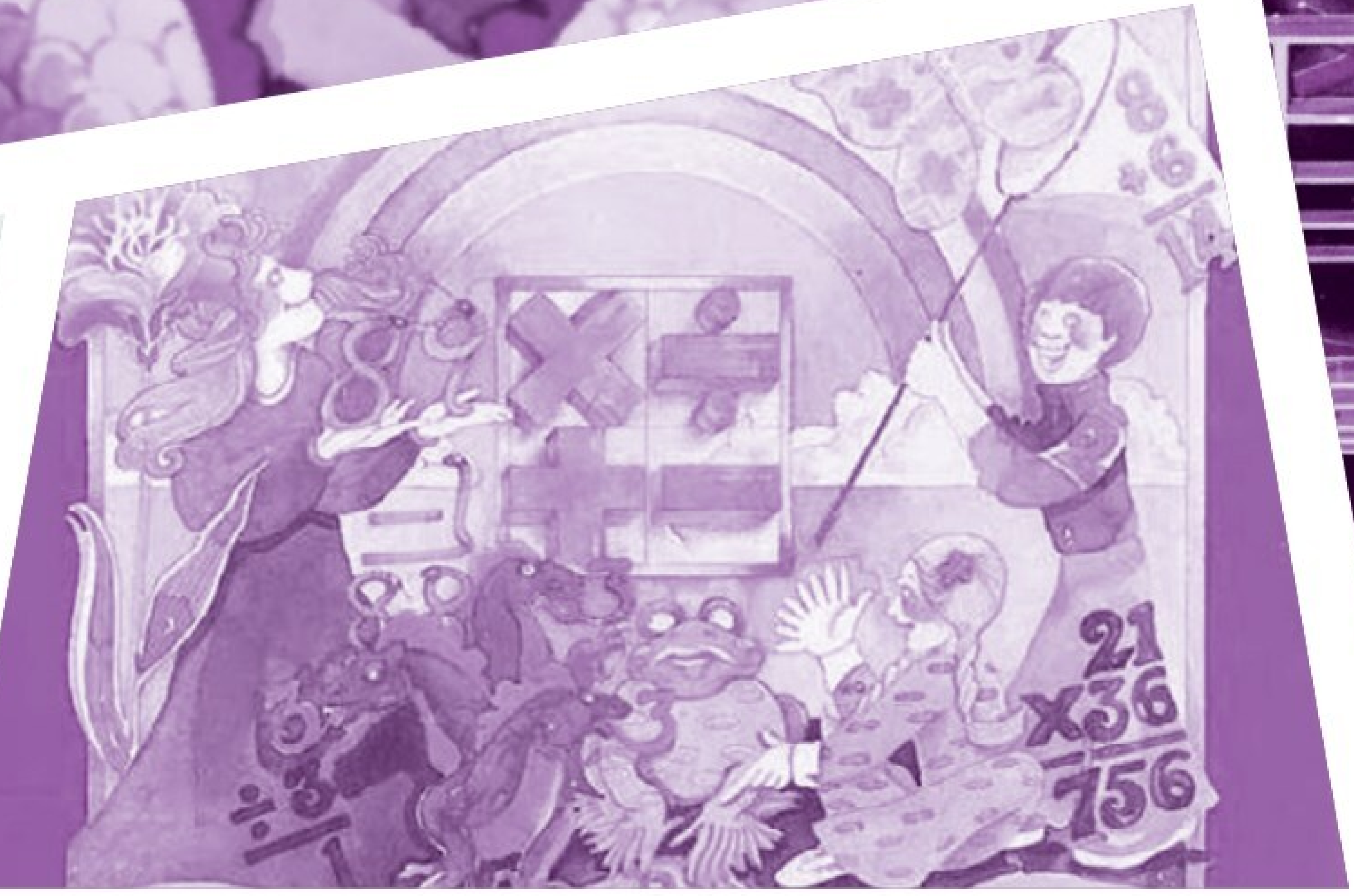
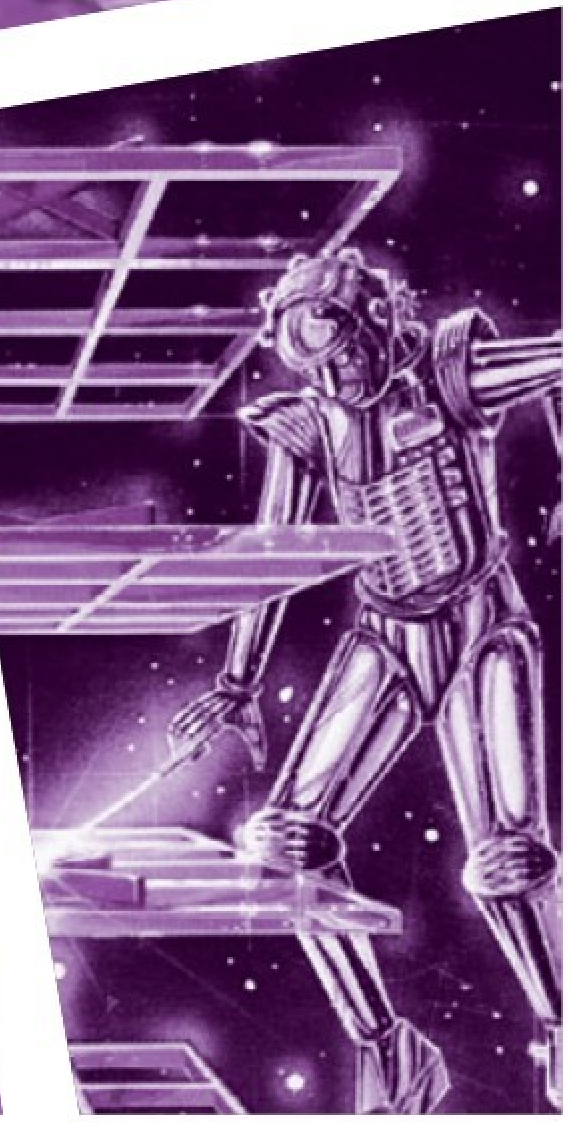
* *The Entertainment Software Association, 2018 Essentials Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*

** *The International Game Developers Association, 2017 Developer Satisfaction Survey*







Susan Jaekel

The Artist

Immediately out of art school, Susan Jaekel secured a steady stream of freelance contracts. She had always been good at drawing and she loved doing it. Jaekel made illustrations for Addison-Wesley's line of educational children's books and created a cartoon owl named Winky to help teach kids how to use Novus calculators. Stringing the paychecks together long enough to pay the bills is an impressive feat for any artist, but Jaekel was just happy making art for kids. Then, in 1977, a friend told Jaekel that Atari was hiring artists to create box covers for its games. That sounded like a fun opportunity, but Jaekel didn't play video games. In fact, she'd never even heard of Atari.

"The whole Atari thing was a special interlude in my illustration life," says Jaekel. "At that time, my inspirations were things like [The Beatles'] Yellow Submarine and artists like Peter Max and Milton Glaser. It was a very fanciful era in illustration. That really lent itself to the video game box art of the day."

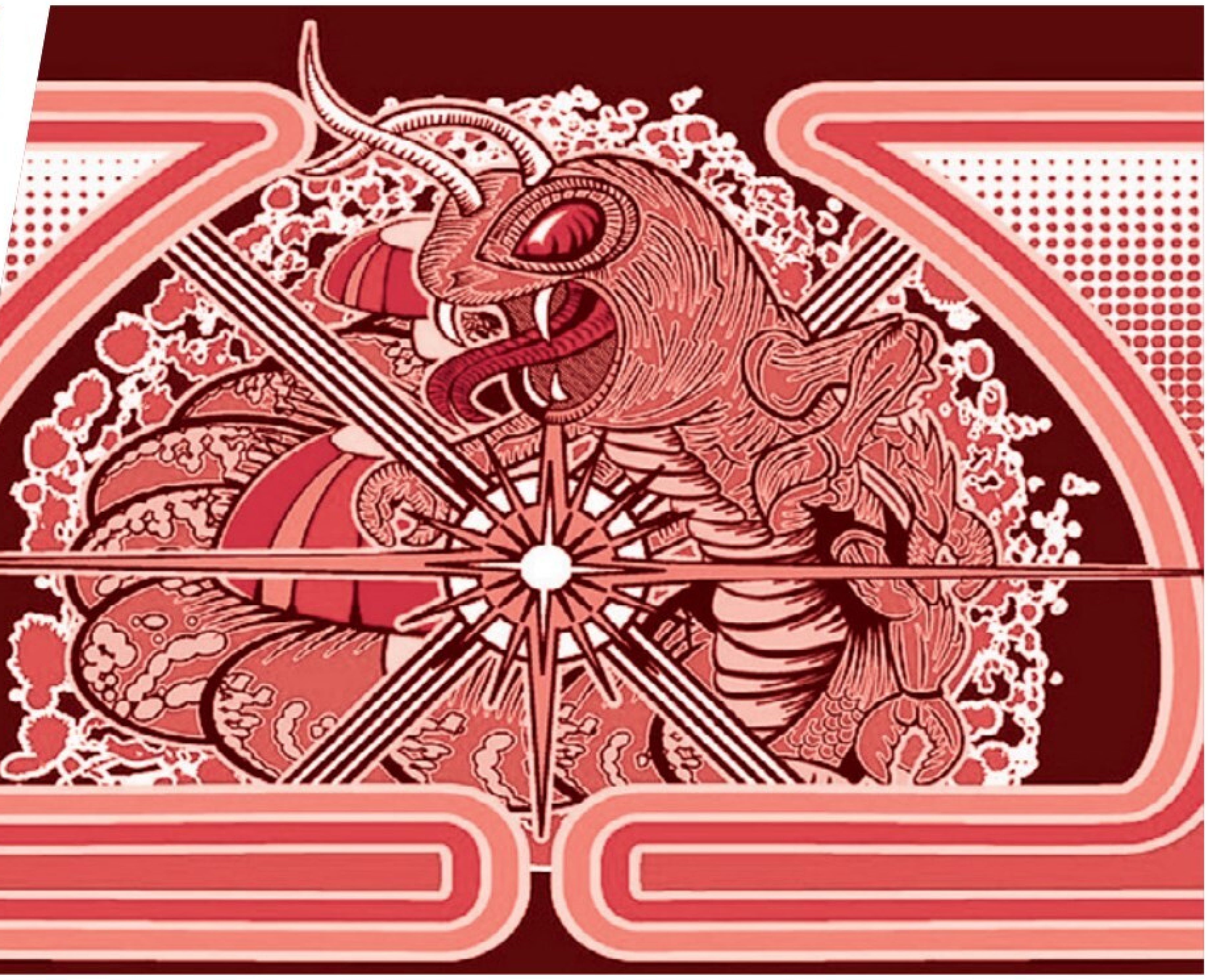
Despite her lack of familiarity with games, Atari liked Jaekel's Art Nouveau-inspired samples and she was hired to design the box for a game called Basic Math, an educational numbers game intended to teach kids arithmetic. Jaekel noticed that Atari was different than other publishers she had worked with at that point. Not only was the game maker incredibly hip and easygoing, but the company encouraged its artists to be creative. Over the years, Jaekel made five additional covers for Atari, for the games Circus, Hangman, Adventure, Concentration, and 3-D Tic-Tac-Toe. By far, her most popular piece was for the classic 2600 game Adventure. That cover featured a castle on a hill and a giant dragon coiled inside a hedge maze, and it has been reprinted many times in books, magazines, and posters over the years.

Surprisingly, Atari's artists never played the games behind their covers. In many cases, Atari's artists never even saw photos or concepts for their games. According to Jaekel, Atari's art director would often simply describe a game to her over the phone. In the case of Adventure, "I think he probably describe it as something about a maze and sneaking around," says Jaekel. However, since Jaekel didn't play video games, she had no idea what Adventure looked like until it was featured in the 2017 film *Ready Player One*.

None of Jaekel's original paintings were ever returned to her, which was the case for most of the artwork Atari collected over the years. "In those days, artists didn't have creative rights to their work," says Jaekel. "I just have the boxes. They just gave me the empty boxes as samples. After they printed the box they would send us a copy, but they didn't give us the game…. Then when Atari – I don't know if they were moving or shutting down – but somebody told me that they threw all the originals in the dumpster."

After working at Atari for half a decade, Jaekel went back to making illustrations of plants and animals for educational books and even created a few jigsaw puzzles for the company Ravensburger. But Jaekel's gaming legacy has lasted longer than her time in the industry. Atari's classic box-art illustrations fired up the imaginations of generations of gamers… even if those illustrations look nothing like their game's onscreen action.

MYSTERY HOUSE
CANDY LAND Game
MILTON BRADLEY COMPANY
7800
Centipede



Dona Bailey

The Programmer

During the late ’70s, the car industry was going through a fuel crisis, and companies like General Motors were in a sprint to improve fuel efficiency using microprocessors. As a programmer at GM, Dona Bailey helped write code that told a Cadillac’s internal processor how to better manage combustion. Bailey was particularly fascinated by the digital display readouts GM used to track their cars’ performance. It was a good job, and it would have been a lucrative career. But in 1980, the Pretenders released their first self-titled album and completely changed Bailey’s life.

“I don’t normally like instrumental songs, but there was one song called ‘Space Invader’ that I listened to a lot. One night at a party, I casually mentioned it to a friend and asked, ‘What is this song? What are Space Invaders?’ And my friend freaked out. He said, ‘It’s a game. You have to play it!’ Well, I’d never even seen an arcade game at that point.”

Bailey’s friend dragged her to a dive bar to play Taito’s arcade hit, and it didn’t take long for Bailey to catch the gaming bug. She soon found herself drawn to other arcade shooters like Galaxian. However, Bailey didn’t just want to play games. She was fascinated with what was happening behind the screen.

“I concluded that they must be using a 6502 microprocessor because that’s what I was using at work, and those parts were so limited back then.” Bailey was right, and as she continued to ask other friends about arcade games, she learned that many of their favorites were made by a company called Atari in Sunnyvale, California. “Six weeks after first seeing Space Invaders, I moved out to Sunnyvale without a job, but with the goal of working for Atari.”

Landing that dream job didn’t take long, but actually creating games proved harder. “Atari’s training method back then was to show you around, take you to a cubicle, and then say, ‘Here you go. Make your game,’” recalls Bailey. “I knew how to write code in assembly language, but I didn’t know anything else. That was a really hard immersive process for me, because I was thrown into something that I didn’t understand and didn’t know. I didn’t have a game idea.”

A fellow coworker finally showed Bailey Atari’s internal gamebook – a loose-leaf binder filled with dozens of discarded ideas for video games. Atari’s programmers would use this notebook whenever they encountered “writer’s block,” and they were encouraged to add to it whenever they had an idea that they didn’t have time to work on.

“There were probably 39 ideas in there about lasers,” says Bailey. “Lasers shooting things and incinerating planets and doing all kinds of things. But laser was spelled with a ‘Z,’ and I remember writing it out with an ‘S’ and thinking to myself, ‘That’s the right spelling.’ A laser game wasn’t appealing to me, but on one page there was an idea that didn’t have anything to do with lasers. It said, ‘A multi-segmented insect crawls onto the screen and is shot by the player.’ That was it. That didn’t seem so bad. I wasn’t burning up the world or blowing up planets. I didn’t like bugs, so it didn’t seem so bad.”

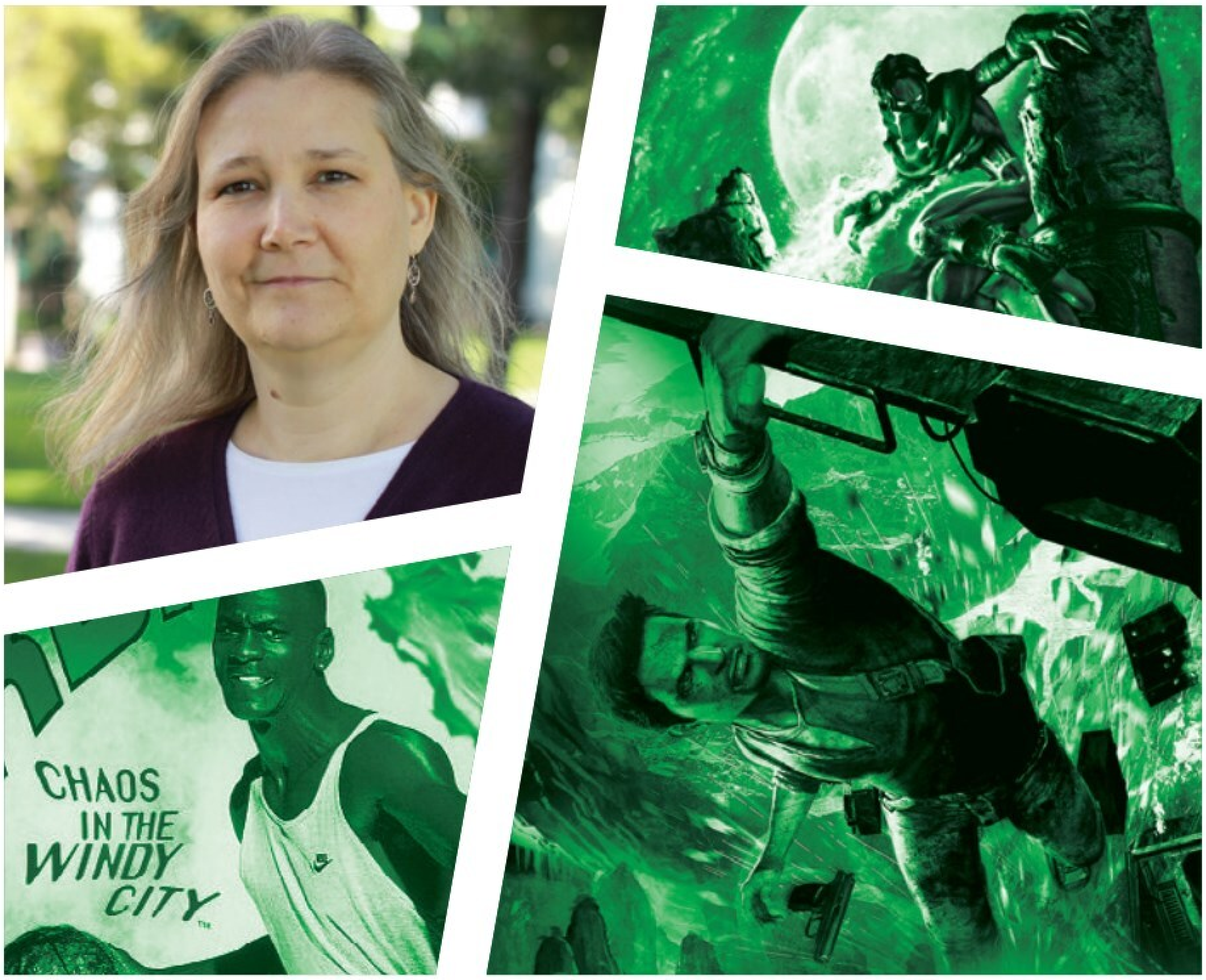
The game Centipede quickly took shape in Bailey’s mind, and now that she had the idea, actually programing out the concept wasn’t hard. When Centipede released in 1981, it was a hit. Its trackball controls felt great, and many players thought it was an incredibly fresh take on the traditional arcade shooter. Bailey’s game became one of Atari’s big success stories.

Unfortunately, Bailey didn’t feel like a success. The young designer had become the first female programmer on a coin-op game, but she wasn’t enjoying her time at Atari. The office felt like a boys club in ways that even GM hadn’t. Sure, Atari had a freewheeling party atmosphere, but it could also be incredibly competitive.

“It was a culture of bad management,” says Bailey. “It was people who had no idea how to lead who suddenly found themselves in charge of driving an industry. I don’t think it was all about gender. The guys were rough with each other too, but I think my experience was unique because it was isolating to be the only woman. I didn’t want to be perceived – I didn’t want to always be judged by whether I was strong as a fighter. It was just a constant judging atmosphere. Everything was a contest, and I felt like I wasn’t becoming the person I wanted to be, so I was done.”

Bailey left the games industry and went to work at several universities as a programmer, a database administrator, and eventually a teacher. But from afar, she noticed Centipede’s lasting legacy. She recalls one powerful moment in the ‘90s where she had to lean against a Centipede cabinet at a movie theater to scrounge for change. In that moment, she realized that a whole mass of people were still connecting with a thing she had made decades before, but she still couldn’t afford a bag of popcorn.

“It was so weird that people were still enjoying this thing and I was so separate from the industry,” says Bailey. “I left. I vanished. I allowed myself to be written out of the record. I was revised out of the history, deliberately. And it stayed that way for such a long time, about 20 years, because I only started talking about it again 10 years ago. So I’m glad I’ve been able to set the record straight.”



Amy Hennig

The Storyteller

Amy Hennig never dreamed of making games. She wanted to make movies, the kinds of films she grew up loving – big ’80s blockbusters like *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*. At film school, Hennig studied traditional animation and cinema history. She also had the opportunity to experiment with early Silicon Graphics workstations, which opened her to the idea of telling stories through computer graphics. To help pay for school, a friend lined Hennig up with a freelance job making art for a never released Atari 7800 game called ElectroCop. Slowly, Hennig began to wonder if she was in the wrong industry.

“When I was at film school, I started to feel like everything was mapped out,” says Hennig. “It felt like you had to learn the craft that other people had established, and your options were limited. I was getting the message that it was going to be really hard to achieve what I wanted to achieve as a woman. Even now, look at how many female directors are in the film industry. I moved away from an industry that I was getting whiffs of barriers of misogyny and into an industry that was the blue ocean, because nothing was established.”

In 1991, Hennig joined EA as a junior artist and quickly worked her way up to lead designer on Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City, a 1994 SNES action/platformer starring the basketball legend. While Hennig didn’t get to meet Jordan himself, she did receive a signed basketball that read: “To Amy. Great game. Michael Jordan.”

“Which I love, because it sounds like we were playing basketball together,” says Hennig.

The games industry wasn’t without prejudices, but to Hennig it felt ripe with the kind of opportunities she hadn’t found other places. “There could be that atmosphere of a boys club, but because it was a young industry and because it was sort of the wild west, it didn’t feel like the ossified, ingrained boys club that you might find in other industries,” says Hennig. “It felt like a meritocracy. To some, that might sound naïve, and when I look back at certain events, I think maybe there was more misogyny there than I realized, but I don’t want to see myself as a victim.”

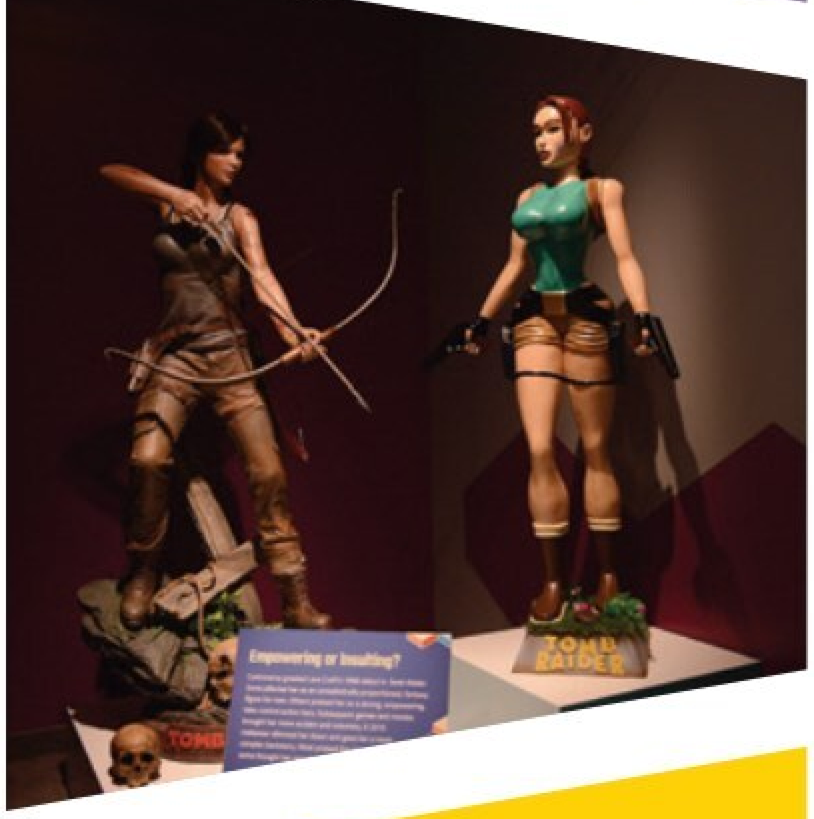
Hennig continued to work her way up the industry. She directed the Legacy of Kain series for Crystal Dynamics, the first three Uncharted games for Naughty Dog, and then spent several years working with Visceral Games on a Star Wars project until EA shut down the studio in 2017. In the end, Hennig got to work on her own versions of Indiana Jones and Star Wars, and while some of those projects didn’t have happy endings, Hennig realized that, throughout her career, something more important was happening. As Hennig built her impressive resume, a younger generation got to see women like Hennig make games – and that visibility was important.

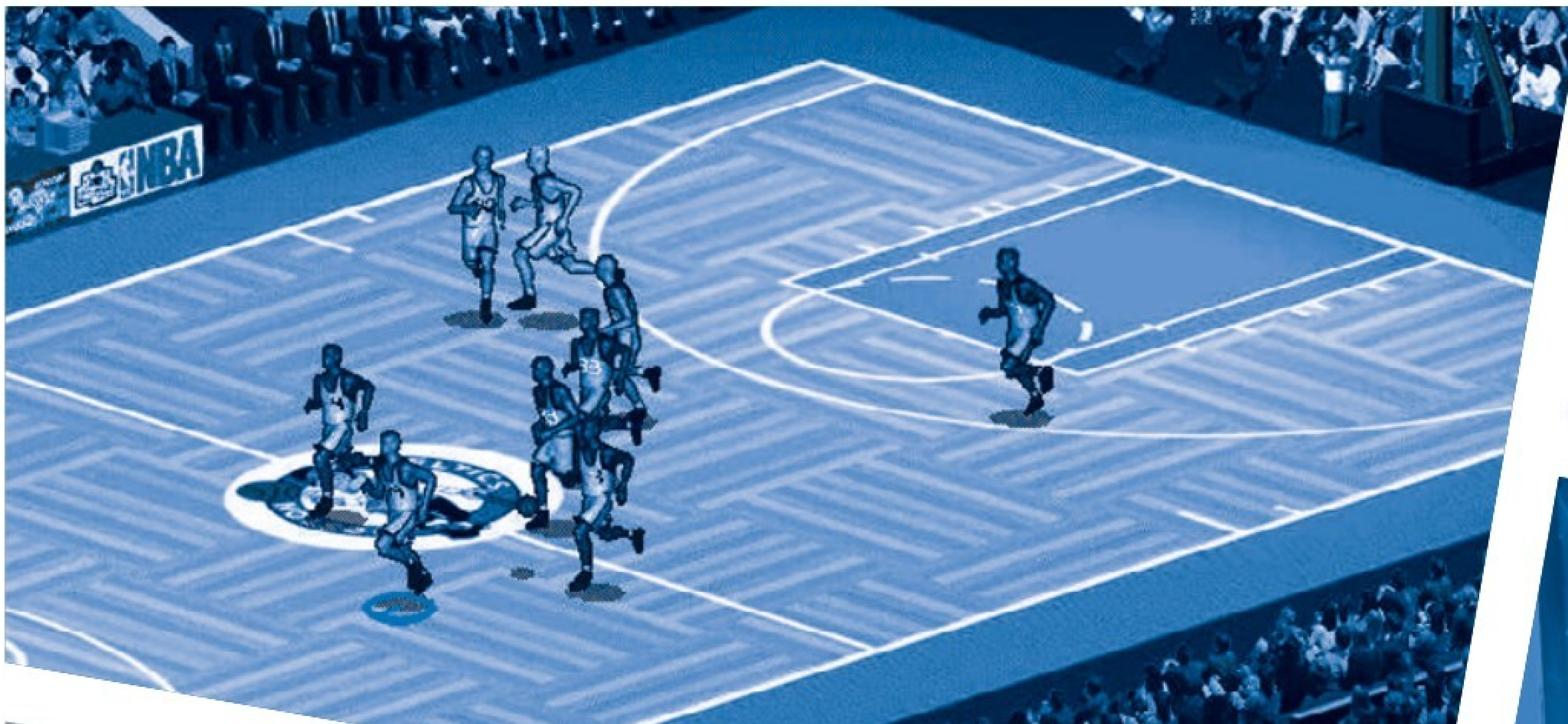
“Generally I stay out of the fray – I don’t like to feel like I am a female game designer. I’m a game designer. But when I saw the stuff happening during Gamergate, I realized the narrative getting pushed out was that the game industry was hostile towards women. I thought, ‘Well, not in my experience,’ but that’s only my experience. I saw women being discouraged and taking another path, which is what I had done in film. That pissed me off. Why were we discouraging young women from joining the industry? Is there misogyny here? Is there prejudice? Yes, in the sense that the game industry exists within the world and there’s misogyny and prejudice inside the world. But I think the way to take that on is by barreling headfirst through obstacles. That’s how change happens.”

A Strong Start

The Strong’s Women in Games exhibit ends in mid-May, but that isn’t the end of the museum’s larger initiative. The museum plans to continue collecting important artifacts and documents that tell the stories behind the games and the important roles women have played making them. “We’re designing new exhibit space and an expansion, and we want to work this exhibit into the overall history of games,” says curator Shannon Symonds.

Fittingly, The Strong National Museum of Play was founded by a woman. For more on its history and a closer look at the facility’s massive collection of video game memorabilia, read our feature “A Strong Grasp On History” in issue 306 of *Game Informer*.





Bonnie Ross

The Leader

Even Bonnie Ross admits she wasn't qualified to work in the games industry. Before working in games, her biggest accomplishments included a computer-science degree – which her father had urged her to pursue – and a job coaching middle-school girls basketball. But when Microsoft entered the market of publishing PC sports games in the early '90s, Ross jumped at the chance to do something different. She figured it would be a nice diversion from a career in database management.

"I'm not even sure I would have gotten into the games industry if it weren't for my love of sports," says Ross. "It wasn't until I was working on my first basketball game that the lightbulb went on and I realized that this was art and this was storytelling. Games were so much different than I thought. Basically, it was an artform that I hadn't looked at as an artform."

Ross quickly took to her role as a producer on Microsoft's NBA Full Court Press and eventually went on to work on games like Zoo Tycoon, Dungeon Siege, Gears of War, Psychonauts, and Mass Effect. Then, in 2007, Bungie purchased its independence from Microsoft, leaving the publisher holding the Halo franchise. Ross put together a proposal for the future of Halo and fought for a leadership role. Microsoft agreed with her vision and helped Ross found 343 Industries to manage the mega-popular, cross-media franchise.

"I think the industry has changed a ton," says Ross. "I think you can visually see that with the people different companies put on the stage at shows and with the characters who are now appearing in games. We are in a positive change place. It has been a predominately male industry, and I think we all probably faced different challenges that were gender related, but I'm really happy that I feel fully supported at Microsoft. I know that's a luxury others maybe haven't had, but I think the industry is growing up."

Today Ross is Microsoft's corporate vice president and studio head of 343 Industries. In early 2019, the Academy Of Interactive Arts & Sciences inducted Ross into its hall of fame, recognizing her leadership and her advocacy for diversity in the industry. Ross' journey from a former middle-school basketball coach to industry icon is impressive, but she is quick to recognize that it might not have been possible without the pioneering efforts of the women who came before her.

The women profiled here, and at the Strong Museum, are only a small sample of the countless stories that have taken place across the games industry in the past several decades. Every story is different, but all of those stories seem to talk about creators who share an enthusiasm for making new forms of art and technology that inspire others. Like the world we live in, the games industry is flawed, but over the years it has grown into a more welcoming place for creators of all walks of life, and the next generation of game makers owes an incalculable debt to the women who helped blaze that trail and shaped the industry into what it is today. ◆

Indie Devs Seek Pixel Perfection

The current video game landscape reveals no shortage of developers inspired by the games of yesteryear, but some stand out more than others through aesthetic sophistication and plain old fun, revealing the way a pixel-style presentation can be reimagined for today's gaming scene. *by Matt Miller*

Katana Zero is the brainchild of Askiisoft. The developer describes its sidescrolling action as a "neo-noir action platformer," and it's hard to find a description more apt. While the color palette is seemingly inspired by Hotline Miami, it's not the only aspect of the game that might draw comparisons. The action is incredibly fast-paced, with instant death as the price for a mistake, quick respawns back to stage openings, and a brutal and bloody style that that seems at first to be at odds with the colorful pixel graphics. But it would be a mistake to call this a copycat, as Katana Zero is quite original in its own right.

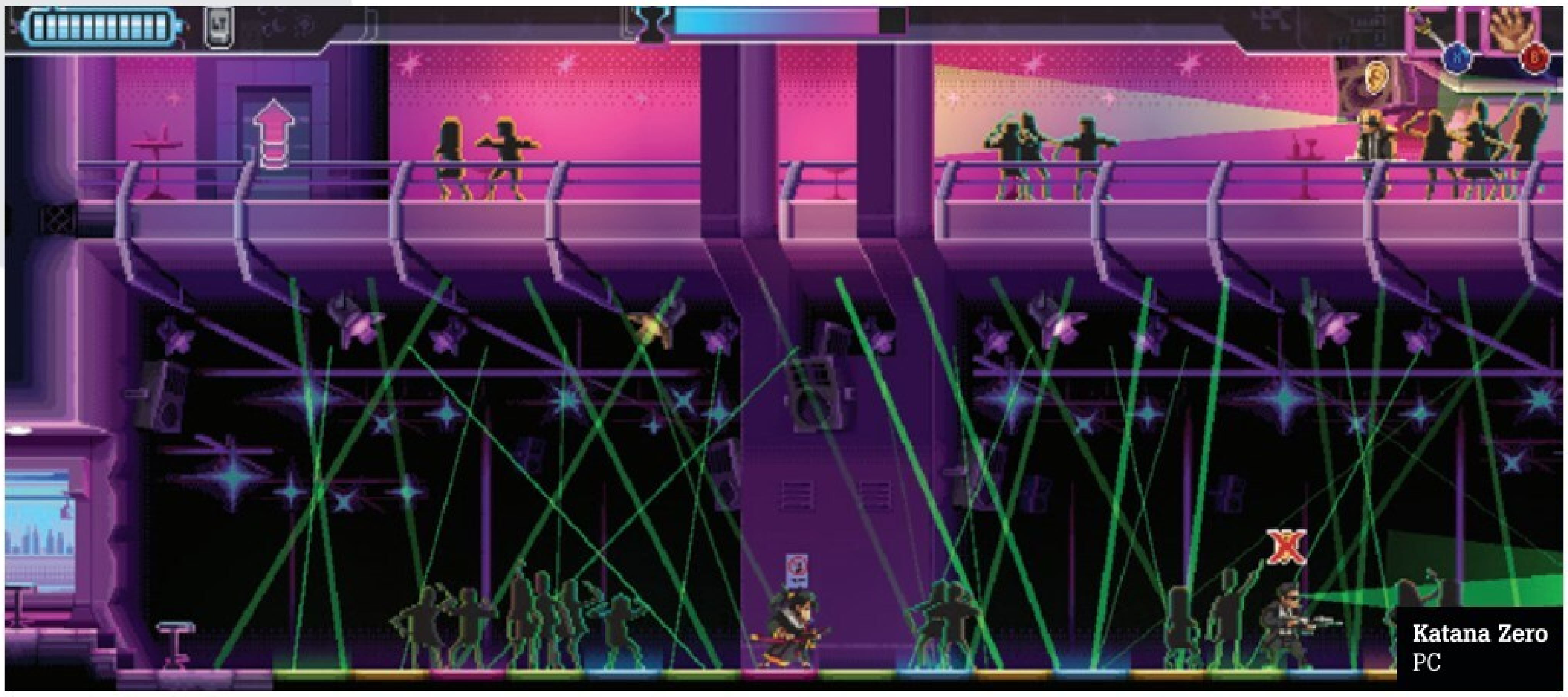
Players control a katana-wielding samurai as he moves through one modern-day assassination after the next. Action is intense and characterized by sudden vicious exchanges, and every room you move through becomes like a puzzle. If I slam through the door I'll knock that first thug to the ground, I can slash his buddy with my sword, and if I'm fast, I can fling this bottle I picked up on the nearby table into the head of the gunner across the hall. Inevitably, your plan doesn't quite pan out as a new variable enters play, and the battle instantly rewinds back to the start to give you another shot. Along the way, you can deflect bullets with your sword, roll under automated gunfire, and snag anything not nailed down to batter your enemies from afar. To help you, a slow time effect can be triggered to pull off those especially insane combos.

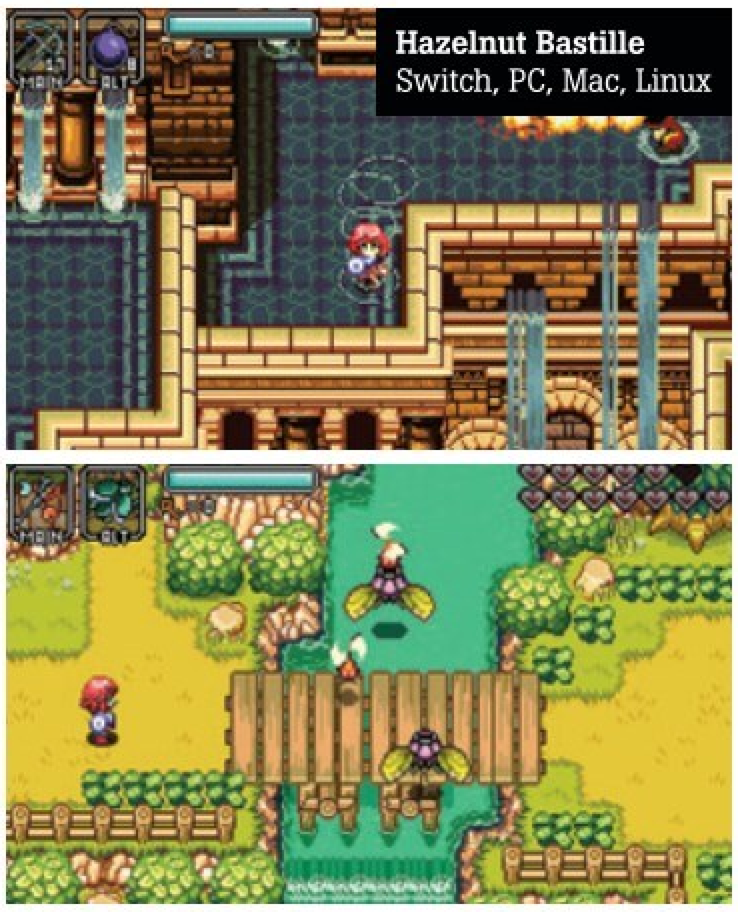
The whole thing is overlaid with a VHS-tape visual filter, which does wonders to extend the feeling that this is one of those great fast-paced and bloody martial arts films from the '80s. When returning to the game after a break, you'll even choose your level by plugging a tape into a virtual VCR, labeled with the different level names. The filmic presentation is helped along by a surprisingly intriguing storyline. Your character begins the game under the sway of some mysterious individual who seems to double as your personal psychiatrist, but the drug cocktail he injects you with after every session suggests he doesn't exactly have your best interests at heart. In between savage battles, you return to a worn-down apartment, drink herbal tea, listen to the neighbors' raucous dance parties, and find what rest you can between haunted nightmares about your childhood. The overall effect is stylish, oppressive, and intriguing. The game is a potent twist on expectations for an action game, and I'm eager to see the full experience when it releases on PC in the next couple of months.

Where Katana Zero uses pixel graphics to attempt something brand new, Aloft Studio is creating an immaculate homage to the 16-bit era with its Zelda-like **Hazelnut Bastille**. The successful Kickstarter last year showed off the work the studio has already done, and I've rarely encountered a project that has taken its research and inspirations so seriously. From an intricate analysis of the grid-based enemy patterns that defined top-down action/adventures of the period, to a detailed explanation of the art and color palettes, it's clear from their writing about their own game that the developers understand what made games like A Link to the Past so special.

That sophistication of historical perspective isn't just academic. As part of its crowdfunding drive, Aloft released a standalone demo that shows off what they're going for. Players take on the role of a young woman who recently arrived on a strange, ruin-strewn land, and as the game begins, it's unclear what has drawn her to risk life and limb to explore here. Within moments of play, the game nails the presentation of an old-school Zelda adventure, from the feel of sword swings to the pace of movement and even the speed of one of the bombs you drop to clear debris. Gameplay is a mix of exploration, combat with roaming monsters, and puzzle solving, especially when you enter one of the underground dungeons filled with its many locked rooms, traps, and secrets. Hazelnut Bastille also features a robust crafting system and a world of mysterious individuals to trade with; there's no currency, so every exchange is based on finding and offering what each person is looking for.

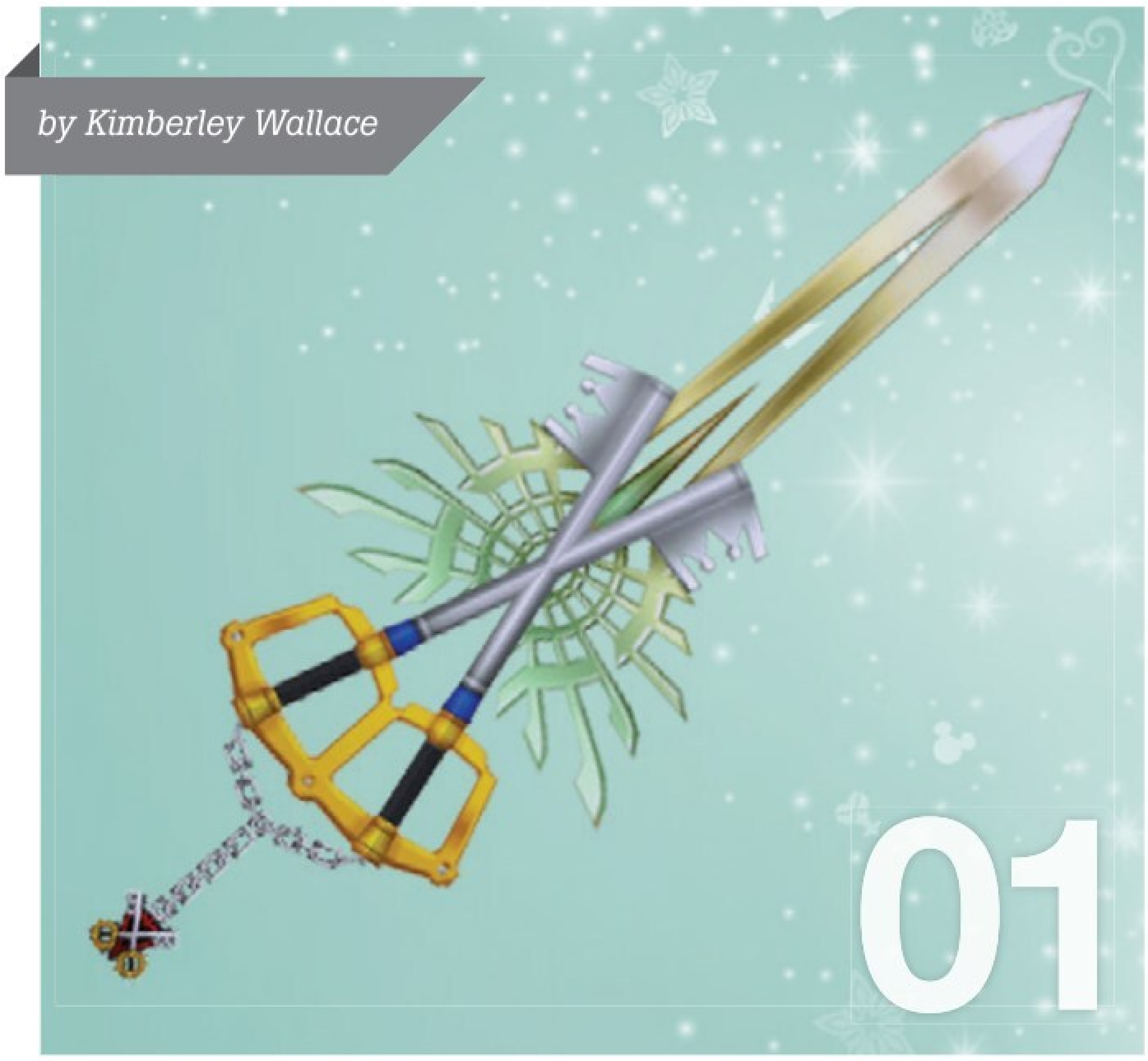
While the Zelda love is in abundance, Hazelnut Bastille's original level designs, puzzles, and weapons ensure it's far more than just a copycat. It's a throwback, but one informed by a deep understanding of what made the 16-bit classics so great. We'll see if the studio can match the fun of the games it's emulating when it hits Switch, PC, Mac, and Linux in mid-2019. ◆


Katana Zero
PC


Hazelnut Bastille
Switch, PC, Mac, Linux

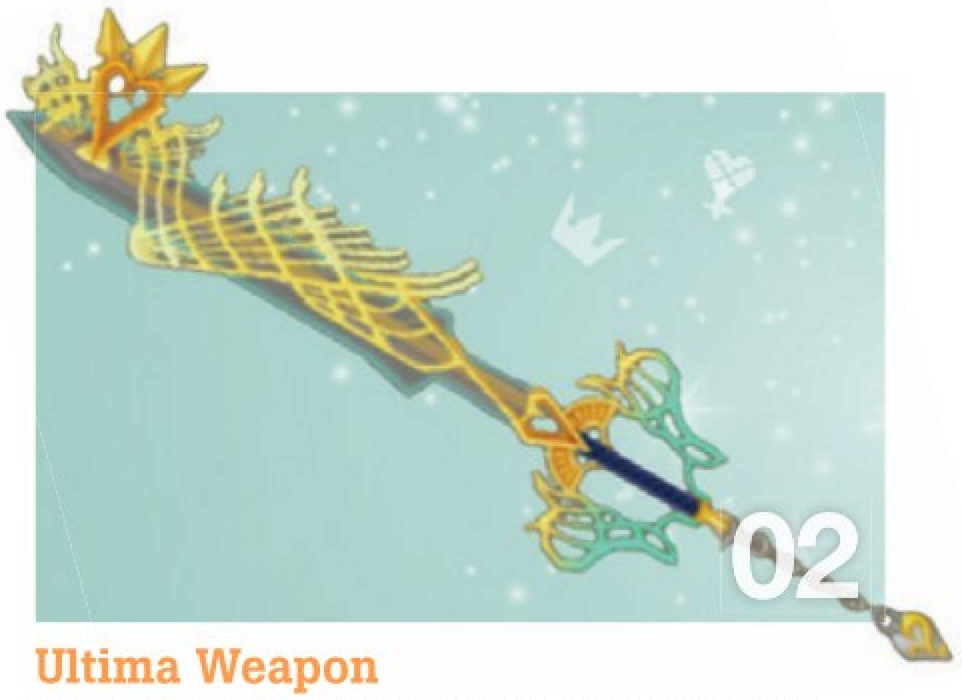
KINGDOM HEARTS KEYBLADES

by Kimberley Wallace



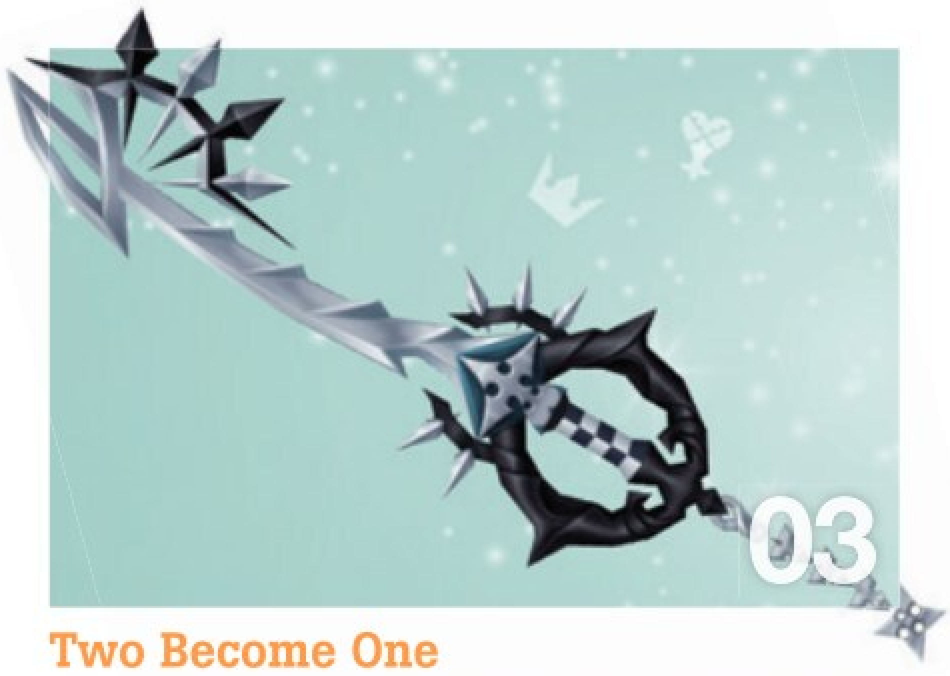
X-blade

This big, bad keyblade is the original one, providing the model for all to aspire to. A perfect representation of the clash between light and darkness, it is the only keyblade that can summon the door to Kingdom Hearts. The Master Xehanort saga revolves around this one weapon because it's so important and powerful.



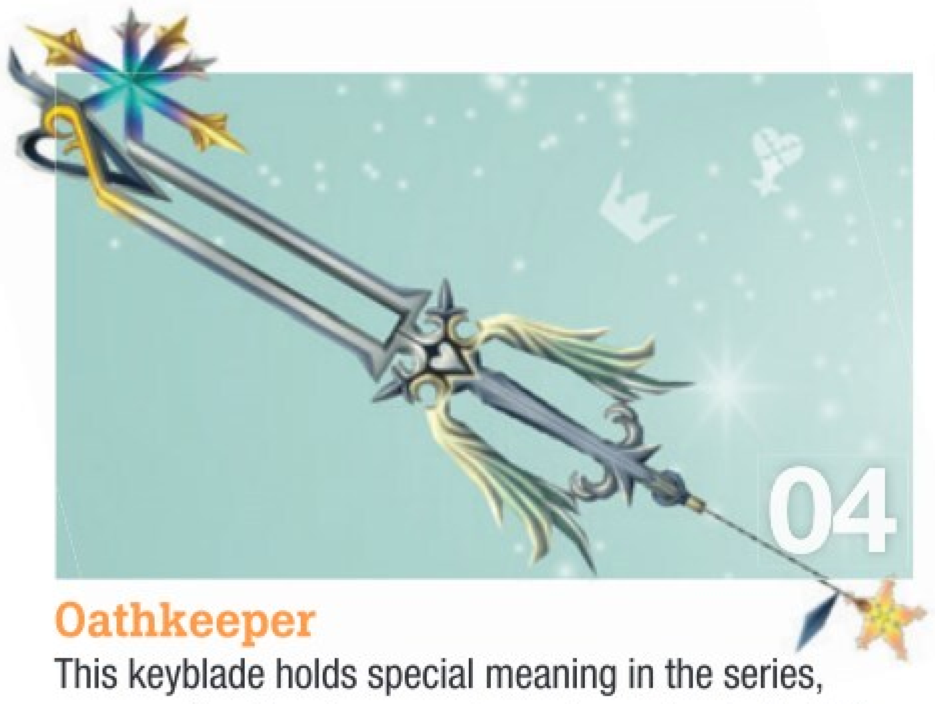
Ultima Weapon

True to its Final Fantasy namesake, this is one of the hardest keyblades to secure, but worth it for its superior power. We've seen different versions of this highly sought-after keyblade across entries, and it never disappoints in its design and phenomenal stats.



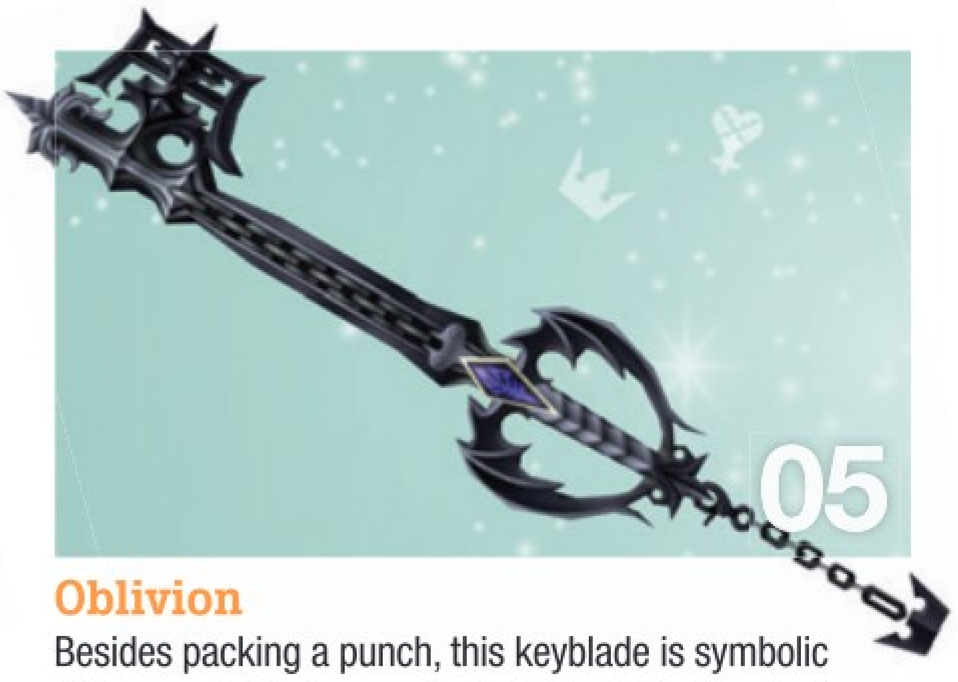
Two Become One

What do you get when you combine two already powerful keyblades like the Oathkeeper and Oblivion? One hell of a keyblade for Roxas. A mix of light and darkness power, this keyblade is more sword-like, and the design is pretty spiffy, too.



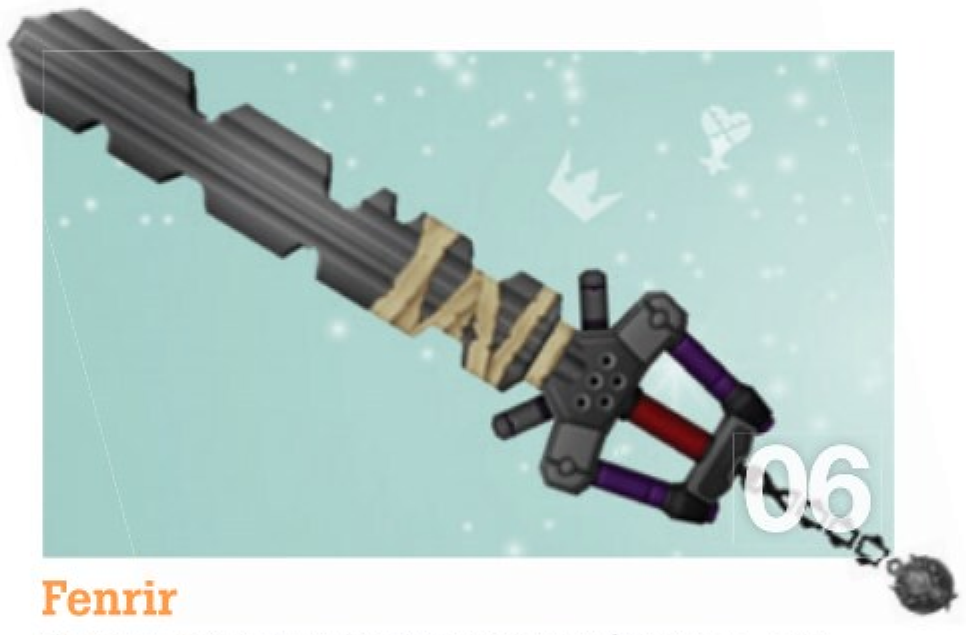
Oathkeeper

This keyblade holds special meaning in the series, representing Sora's memories and promise to Kairi. It is usually unlocked with events involving her, as a nod to their special relationship. It's also one of the most balanced keyblades.



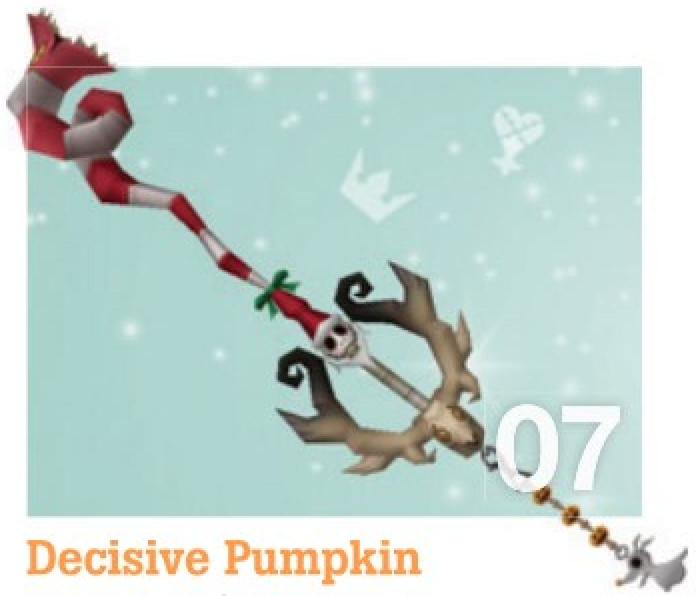
Oblivion

Besides packing a punch, this keyblade is symbolic of Sora and Riku's complicated friendship. The design can also be seen as a nod to Riku's darkness and isolation. Add in the blade's great reach and critical bonuses, and it's easy to see why it's a fan-favorite.



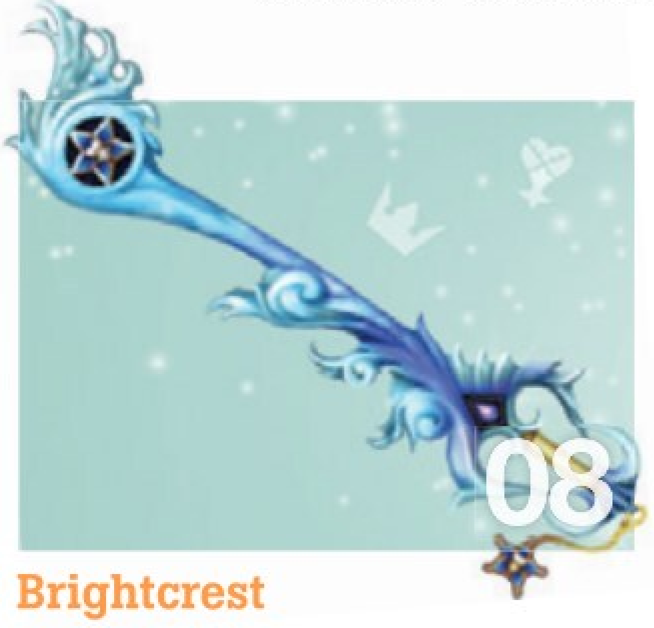
Fenrir

If you're going to defeat the almighty Sephiroth, you might as well get an incredible keyblade as a reward. That's the Fenrir, which is actually an ode to Cloud Strife, incorporating his fusion swords and motorcycle of the same name from Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children.



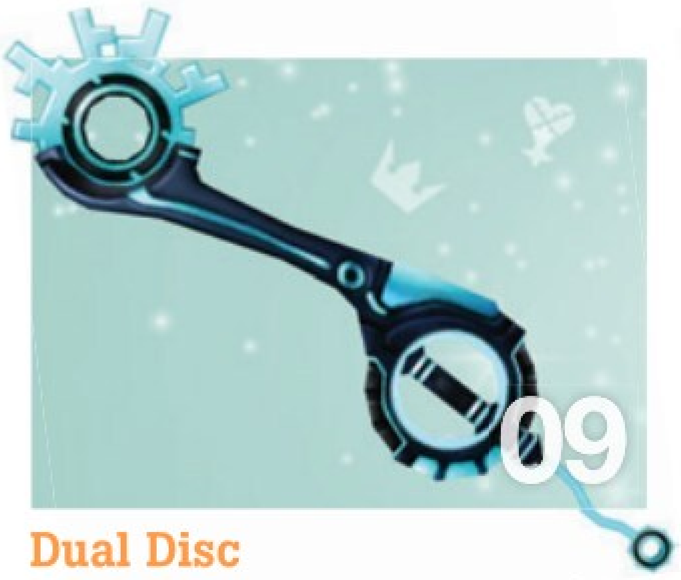
Decisive Pumpkin

This is one of Kingdom Hearts II's strongest keyblades, thanks to a combo boost that is downright deadly. If you're a Nightmare Before Christmas fan, it also delights with fun callbacks to the film. When fighting, jack-o'-lanterns appear and it jingles with every hit.



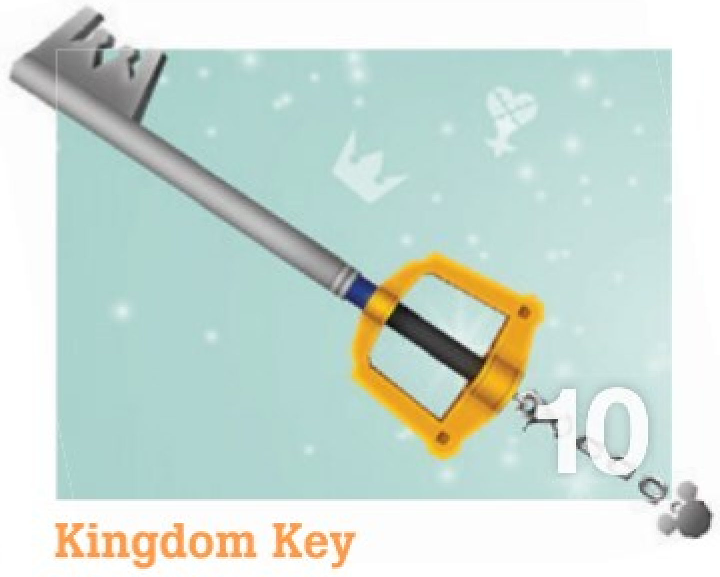
Brightcrest

Aqua gets a fitting keyblade, symbolizing her association with light and acknowledging her water theme. Brightcrest turns heads with cresting waves on its exterior and holds its own in battle, boosting magic and critical strikes.



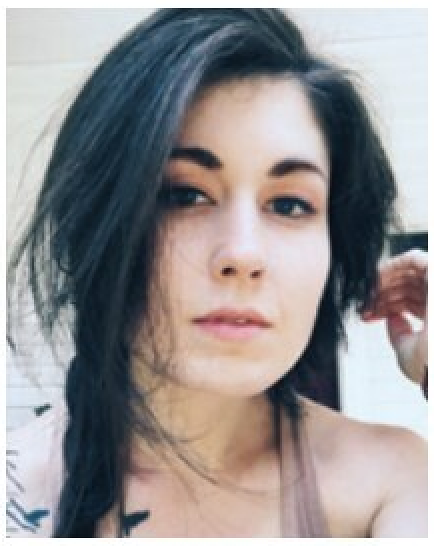
Dual Disc

This is the best thing to come out of Dream Drop Distance's Tron world. The aesthetic goes perfectly with The Grid, matching its black and neon color scheme. With such a cool exterior, it's the keyblade you never wanted to let go purely for superficial reasons.



Kingdom Key

The design might be "simple and clean," but the Kingdom Key remains the most iconic keyblade, appearing in every entry. It isn't the most powerful, but it's the only keyblade that brings out Sora's true power, making it his keyblade's true form.



Name:
Ky Parker

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Patreon.com/
CaptainDangerous

Captain Dangerous

Bringing toys to life through colorful photography

What started as a fun childhood activity with her brother has evolved into something that has netted her tens of thousands of followers across various social networks. We spoke with Captain Dangerous about her action figure photography to learn about her inspiration and process.

interview by Brian Shea

How did you get into photographing figures?
When I was a kid, my brother and I collected action figures. We were big Marvel and DC fans. We used to set up little scenes in our bedroom. It wasn't so much to do it for pictures, but rather something fun that we'd just do together. It always stuck with me. Years later, I moved to Ohio – I'm originally from Indiana – and I've remained a collector throughout the years. I mainly collect video game statues and figures, but when I moved here the GoodSmile Company started coming out with these amazing articulated figures.

This is the quality I wish I had as a kid and it really took me back to when I was younger and collecting action figures with my brother. The whole photography aspect came when I started photographing my collection of video game things, and then when these figures started coming out, I'd take them out into the woods and take pictures of them. It was an outlet for me. I was going through some tough stuff in my life, and photographing these figures was a creative outlet to escape the real world and create these little tiny worlds with these figures.

Do you remember the first Nendoroid figure you bought?
The Mikasa Nendoroid from *Attack on Titan* was my first, but my the first one I actually photographed was Toon Link. He's awesome. I love his little expressions and his side-eye he gives. He's one of my favorites to use in photos because of that face.

Are there others that you love shooting?
Probably my favorite, as much as the Zelda series is my favorite, I think my absolute favorite figure to photograph is Kirby. He's a hilarious Nendoroid because he's literally just a ball with magnet arms and legs. It makes him so much fun to pose; he comes with all these great expressions, and Kirby is just fun to put into any atmosphere, any setting. He works with everything. He's such a cheerful, happy character and I just absolutely adore him. I purposely try to find ways to do Kirby pictures, especially Kirby interacting with everyday life. I've done photos of him cooking food or helping me do something like he's alive. He's the perfect figure for that. He cracks me up with his little facial expressions.

The downside of how well articulated these figures are is that they are not cheap. Have you ever had to give your wallet a break?
It's funny you say that because I just spent some time reorganizing. My husband's office is upstairs and he's a big Gundam collector, but in my office downstairs it's all the Nendoroid and Figma figures. I not only collect the video game figures, but also a lot of the anime figures – it's more of a personal collection. It got to the point where we were preordering them, but the preorders go out so far that we'd forget about them, so one month we'd get a giant box and didn't remember ordering any of them! It got to a point

where we had to be a little more selective on figures, mainly because of space. I think between the two of us, we have between 150 or 200 figures. He was collecting before me, and I've been collecting for like six or seven years. When the Nendoroid and Figma lines came out, it just added to it.

Do you photograph the Figmas in your collection as well?
I do, but the only thing that kind of sucks about the Figma line is they don't come out as often. They're a little more selective about which characters they do because they're more expensive to make, I think. I have all of the Nintendo Figma, but they're not as expressive. That's the biggest thing that comes to photographing, at least for me, is having that expression. The Nendoroids come with a lot of different faceplates where you can change their expression, and sometimes even ones from different series will work. I have done a few, and I'm really hoping to do more, especially if they come out with more video game-themed ones; I'm really hoping for some Figma from Breath of the Wild. I would love a Breath of the Wild Link or a Zelda one.

What character do you most want to get a Nendoroid figure of?
Dream Nendoroid would be Breath of the Wild Zelda, or Skull Kid would be amazing! I'm a big fan of Majora's Mask, and I actually have Skull Kid tattooed on my leg. He's one of my absolute favorite characters. He'd be such a cool Nendoroid and could come with all the masks, and he'd be such a great addition to the Majora's Mask Nendoroid Link.

Where do you get your inspiration for the photos?
A lot of the settings you see are either something I've seen in a game or come across in everyday life. A lot of my pictures are inspired from when I was a kid, especially a lot of Christmas ones. A lot of people have memories of baking cookies or something, so that's what I try to do with a lot of the sets. One in particular that I did had Kirby playing in the leaves. I didn't mention it in the post or anything, but my grandmother, who passed away this year, knew me as the little girl who liked to play in the leaves. I kind of transferred a lot of the things I did growing up into my photos. It's very subtle, but people who have known me for years pick up on it. I'm very close to my brothers; we did a lot of stuff outside and played a lot of video games together.

Each photo, sometimes even the silly ones, have a little piece of my childhood. I don't make it super obvious,but I look at it and it's a really happy memory from when I was 6 or 7. Nobody else may know it, but I find it so cool that a lot of people have memories that are like, "Oh man, this picture means a lot to me because I used to do this with my dad!" It means a lot to them, and it impacts me a lot. It makes me really happy to see. I've gotten messages where somebody is having a rough day, and this silly picture of Link getting into trouble makes them feel better. I live for that. That's what it's all about for me.

What does a typical photography session look like for you?
I actually have a lot of different materials I've made myself or modified. I have a lot of kits you can get from craft stores or online. I'll build them and make them my own. I'll either redo them in my style or something that is more fitting for the figure. Before the shoot, depending on the weather, I'll set the photo up beforehand in my office. It depends. Sometimes the sets are completely built and sometimes I have to build them from scratch. One time I spent two and a half hours in a creek setting up a little bridge for Majora's Mask Link!

Is there a way for people to buy prints of your work?
Yes! I have a Patreon (listed above). It's not anything super intensive; I don't push it really hard, but I have a lot of people ask if they can buy prints. At certain tiers, I have prints and also access to behind-the-scenes stuff so people can see what the setup looks like before I take the shot. I give tips on how to do certain things, too. ◆

INSOMN
DAILY BUGLE
SPECIAL EDITION!
JAILBREAK:
RAFT LEAKS!!!
SPIDER-MAN
BE GREATER
STANCE 3

photos: Robert Paul

From Editorials To Superheroes

Bryan Intihar is the creative director of Insomniac Games' Spider-Man. Much like the web-swinger's closet that is filled with different suits, Intihar has worn several hats in the video game industry. He worked in retail, wrote for a magazine, did PR, was a community manager, worked as a producer, and now serves as a guiding voice for one of the biggest entertainment franchises in the world. We talked to Intihar about his unlikely path through the industry and the spur-of-the-moment decisions that forever changed his life.

interview by Andrew Reiner

Almost every game director or creative director I talk to has a different story to tell in terms of how they landed that job. Yours started with game journalism. Walk me through your entry point into video games.
It happened late in life for me. The big things for me when I was growing up were sports and video games. Those were my life. If I wasn't playing sports, I was playing video games. A lot of that video game time was spent with my best friend, who lived two doors down from me. I remember sitting on his doorstep with him and saying, "Wouldn't it be cool if we worked at *Electronic Gaming Monthly*?" I had no plans to be a journalist or anything like that, but I still played games through college, and worked at a Software Etc. – that tells you how dated I am. I was fully prepared to go to grad school to become a clinical psychologist. I wanted to be a family counsellor. That was my goal.

One summer when I was working at Software Etc., an editor from a magazine called *GameWeek* would come in, and he eventually said, "You know a lot about games. Would you ever want to intern or write for us?" I said I was flattered, but I'm going to grad school. After I took my entrance exams to get accepted to that school, I remember waking up late at night, freaking out, and telling my girlfriend that I just need to do something fun. I didn't enjoy college enough. I was too wrapped up in grades, and I said, "Would it be crazy if I did that writing internship at that magazine?" I emailed the guy and sent a couple of writing samples in. The next thing you know in the last semester of my senior year, I was taking one class, doing my senior thesis, and interning three days a week at the magazine. I knew within a couple of days that I wanted to do that full time. I studied for my last college final on my way home from my first E3. The 2000 E3. From there, I moved out west at around the same time *EGM* relocated from Chicago to San Francisco. It was a dream of mine to work for them, and they just happened to be looking for editors. A friend of a friend got them my résumé, and two years later I was working for them.

Was there anything you learned studying psychology that set you up for a career in games?
I gained an English major, so I learned how to write. [My teacher] was by far the toughest editor I've ever had. The career at *EGM* is what really put me over the top of being able to write something that was a coherent sentence. In terms of psychology, I did a lot of internships, and dealt with a lot of different people. I think just understanding what makes people tick, and knowing that we all process things differently, and all have our own interests and beliefs is something I learned. It all comes down to a common ground and common language. I brought that not only to my writing job but especially game development – where so much of it is collaboration and communication and working with a diverse group of people.

Was there anything you learned while writing at *EGM* that set you up for game development?
I would say I didn't learn about game development, but what I did learn was the mentality of people working together to put out the absolute best product possible by any means possible. I always considered myself to be a hard-working person, but to be teamed up with 12 other people who work just as hard, and are working toward a common goal – that was the thing I learned and was able to apply to game development. Obviously, we're a 100-plus team [at Insomniac Games], but it's that total commitment to make the best thing possible.

When you got your job at *EGM*, were you like "Okay, this is my career"?
I did at first. I was on a bus with Dan Hsu, our editor-in-chief, and said, "This is what I want to do." I was there for five years, and said that at the three-year mark. After that, I started visiting more developers whether they came by for visits or I went to their studios. I just got wowed by how the games were made, and I really liked the people I met. I was fascinated by the games and the people that made them. I started to get an itch to do something else, and I was lucky enough to be able to scratch it.

What led to the career switch?
Ziff Davis, which owned *EGM*, was going through some transitions. We had some reshuffling of positions between *EGM* and *1Up*. I got passed up for a job I thought I was going to get. I was devastated. I worked really hard there. It wasn't anyone's fault there; they all helped me get to where I am today. At that exact moment, my grandfather whom I was super close with got sick. I flew home to pretty much say goodbye to him. I happened to be on the plane reading the *Game Informer* issue with Resistance 2 on the cover. Three to four months before that, I actually talked to Insomniac about a job, and turned them down. I just got married, and my wife got a new job, and I wanted to see where things were going. Then, as I was reading about Resistance 2 on the flight, I leaned over to my wife and said, "I should have taken that job at Insomniac."

It was her that said, "Hey, why don't you call? Worst thing they can do is say the position is filled." I called Ryan Schneider (Isomniac's chief brand officer) that day, and he said, "How fast can you be here for an interview?" I booked a flight to L.A. and interviewed a couple of weeks later. The next thing I know it's GDC of 2008, I'm having lunch with Amy Hennig, and I got a call from Insomniac asking if I wanted to work there. The rest is history.

You had experience in writing, but none in game creation, right?
I came in as a community manager. It was the right position at the time. I didn't have development experience. Being a game journalist, you play a lot of games and talk to a lot of developers. From that you gain an understanding of what makes a great game experience. I wasn't foolish enough to think I knew how characters were made or how A.I. worked. Some might say I still don't know. [laughs]

What I wanted to do was come in to a job that I thought I could help right away. They already had a great community presence, but I thought I could add to it. I just started spending more time with the production team here and asking the question "Why?" Why does this or that happen in a game? Why don't we do this or that? I didn't pretend like I knew the answers, and I think the team respected that. I think they saw someone who just wanted to learn from them. I became a sponge, and any time someone from production needed help with something, I volunteered, and to the point that I think I annoyed enough people that they let me interview for associate product manager, which is basically a producer here. I started working in that role on a project called Overstrike, which eventually became Fuse. I worked my way up the production ranks and became the director of project management on Sunset Overdrive.

When the opportunity with Marvel and Spider-Man came about, I put my name in the ring to be the creative director. I was fortunate enough that Ted Price, our president and CEO, trusted me with that responsibility. And now it's four years later and Spider-Man is out on store shelves. It's been a

crazy ride. I've had a very blessed professional career, working where I want to work and doing what I think a lot of people dream about doing. I never take what I do for granted. Ever.

I think it's an inspirational path for a lot of people. A lot of times people look at job openings and think they are underqualified. Were there any skills you learned at Insomniac? Did you have to learn a specific program or anything like that?
As a producer, you have to become a pro at Excel. There's also database management, creating assets for the team, making sure builds are created properly, testing the game, taking notes, helping the team prioritize, and the big thing I learned on the production side is keeping the creative juices of your talented team flowing. They don't need to be bogged down in scheduling. I like to present options for them. "I did the legwork. You pick the best route." I am respectful of what they have to accomplish. The bar at Insomniac is high. We try to remove every barrier or thing that prevents them from doing their jobs.

Did you learn you would be the creative director for the next project before Spider-Man was locked in?
The history of the project was we were finishing up Sunset Overdrive and one of my jobs was getting it out on time, and it wasn't buggy and over-budget. From a reviewer's standpoint, I was saying, "Can this go out the door and get a high review?" I think that is one thing that helped me, being able to look at the game through that lens. I was updating Ted at the time on the game, and he was in a meeting with Sony, and I asked him how it went. He said, "A really funny thing, how would you feel about working with Marvel?" I literally said to him that I would cut off my left arm to work with Marvel. That's how it started. One thing that is great about Ted as a leader is he wants to work on something that the team is passionate about. A week or two later, he asked the team what life is after Sunset Overdrive, and he put that red Marvel logo in a PowerPoint presentation, and you could hear the entire team gasp. That's when I knew we were doing a game with Marvel. It then became a question of which character, which really wasn't a debate. I think I told Ted in that first meeting that we need to do Spider-Man. He fits our studio so well. Sony was excited about it, Marvel was excited about it, and so were we.

Insomniac is a studio that has specialized in original intellectual properties since its inception. Spider-Man comes in, and you are now playing with someone else's creation. Talk to me about the transition from creative independence to having a partner?
When you first start working on a known IP, you almost think you have the answers to the test, but then you realize you haven't worked with it. In many ways it feels like you are working with a new IP. Yes, there are rules established, and known characters, but we've never created a character that shoots webs. From that, I would say it's just as daunting as working on something new. In some ways there's more pressure because the character is so popular and fans are so passionate about him being represented the right way. I felt immense pressure. Not debilitating, but close to it. We had to get it right. I think we understood the character well, and Marvel helped us clear up any confusion we may have had. Working with Sony also helped us maintain the quality bar we wanted to hit.

Take me through the night of Spider-Man's release. What did you do?
My wife is a saint because I put her through hell two weeks before release. I had every fear and anxiety possible. The only thing I could do the weekend before reviews hit was play God of War. That was the only thing that could distract me. I remember telling my community team that I didn't want to hear about any review early, whether it was good or bad. I didn't want it to affect me either way. I never shut my phone off when I go to bed, but that was the first night I did that. I waited for my wife to come home from the gym and we looked at the reviews together. It was sweet relief. You work on these games for so long, and you care about them so much that all you want them to be is as good as everyone hopes them to be.

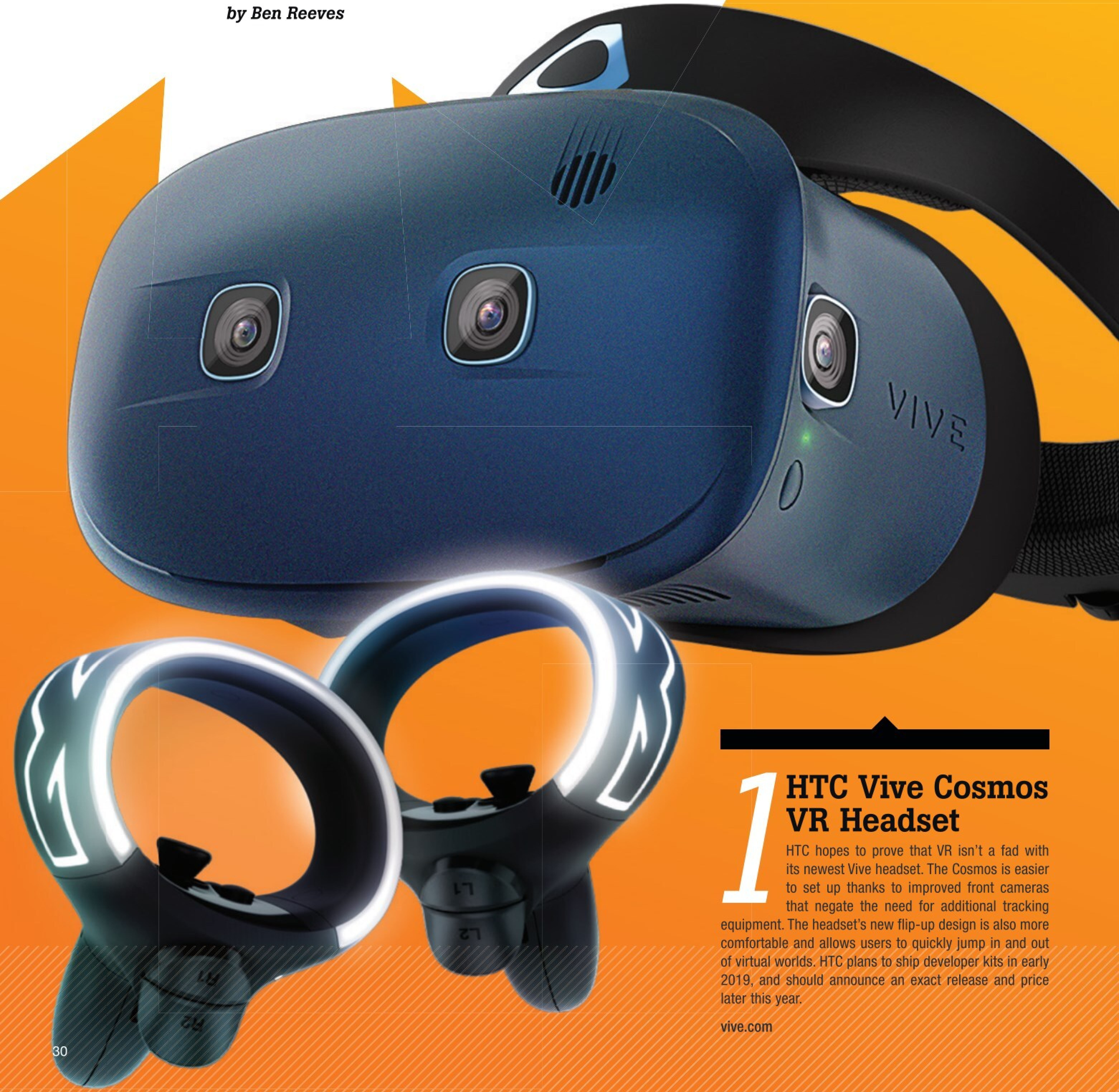
What's going on in the studio now?
I'm actually getting great sleep. I'm enjoying my weekends. It's been great! The momentum of Spider-Man has not slowed down. There are even bigger surprises ahead. ◆

Hot On The Horizon

The best tech of CES 2019

CES is the biggest electronics convention in the world. Every January, thousands of industry taste makers gather to show off tech innovations and hot, upcoming products. These are the most exciting game-related toys to keep on your radar this year.

by Ben Reeves



1 HTC Vive Cosmos VR Headset

HTC hopes to prove that VR isn't a fad with its newest Vive headset. The Cosmos is easier to set up thanks to improved front cameras that negate the need for additional tracking equipment. The headset's new flip-up design is also more comfortable and allows users to quickly jump in and out of virtual worlds. HTC plans to ship developer kits in early 2019, and should announce an exact release and price later this year.

vive.com

2
ALIENWARE

2 Alienware Area 51m Gaming Laptop

Alienware ripped apart one of its high-end gaming PCs and rebuilt the machine to fit inside a portable laptop shell. Inside, a ninth-gen Intel CPU and an Nvidia 20-series GPU keep even the most demanding software running smooth. Both chipsets are modular, meaning you might actually be able to upgrade this laptop at some point down the road, which is great because its 17-inch 144Hz G-Sync display should continue to look amazing for years to come.

Starting at $2,549 | dell.com

3 Powercast Wireless Charging Grips For Switch

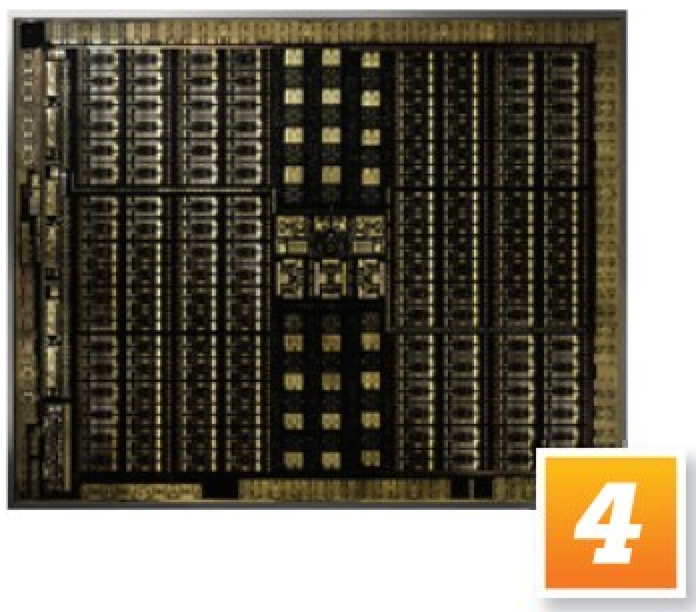
Using a single Switch Joy-Con can be cramped and the controllers are hard to charge when they're disconnected from the console. Powercast has solved both problems with a comfortable grip that doubles as a portable charging station. The Powercast uses contactless wireless charging to give your Joy-Cons extra juice even while you're in the middle of a Smash Bros. marathon.

powercastco.com

4 Nvidia Mobile RTX 2080 Graphics Cards

Nvidia made waves last year with its RTX 20-series of graphics cards, which enabled PCs to perform complex ray-tracing functions – a graphical technique that allows for hyper-realistic, real-time lighting. Now, Nvidia is bringing this powerful chipset to mobile computers. These mobile RTX 20-series cards will be available in over 40 laptops by the end of the year (some of which started shipping in January) and Nvidia says its mobile tech can provide ray-tracing for games like Battlefield V even while running at 60 fps.

nvidia.com



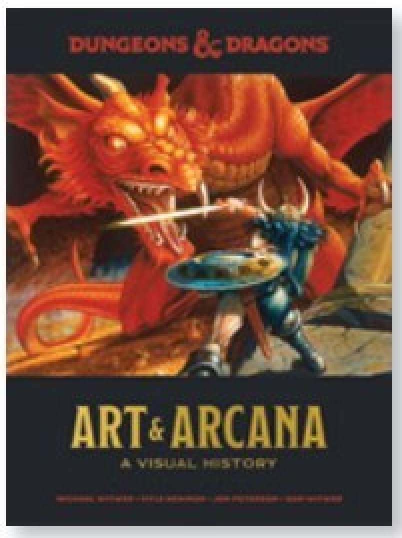
5
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

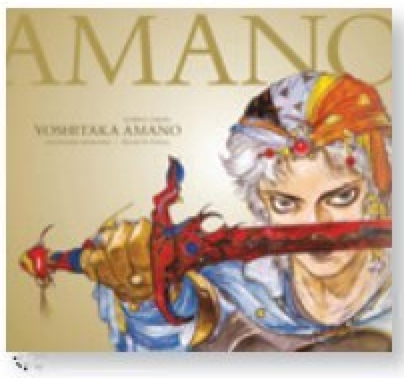
5 ROG Swift 27-inch 4K Gaming Monitor

Many gamers plug their high-end PCs into televisions, which is why hardware manufactures have begun producing monitors that are big enough to compete with the displays in our living rooms. The ROG Swift is the first in a series of BFGDs (Big Format Gaming Displays) that will release this year. The Swift has an HDR-ready resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 with an overclockable 144Hz refresh rate, and the system's quantum-dot technology allows for incredibly clean colors and smoother gradation. Asus has already started shipping this impressive monitor, so you can go ahead and throw away your television. ◆

$1,999 | asus.com

Media Shelf





THE BANNER SAGA 3 VINYL SOUNDTRACK

Austin Wintory's epic soundtrack brought to life the brooding darkness of Norse mythology in Stoic Game's The Banner Saga trilogy. This 2xLP was recorded with the London Studio Orchestra and features the vocals of Faroese singer-songwriter Eivør.

$40.00
store.iam8bit.com

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ART AND ARCANA: A VISUAL HISTORY

This illustrated guide through the history of Dungeons & Dragons contains more than 700 paintings, sketches, and rare photographs that tell the story of how an obscure pen-and-paper game grew into a juggernaut that has influenced pop culture at large.

$50.00
dnd.wizards.com

YOSHITAKA AMANO: THE ILLUSTRATED BIOGRAPHY – BEYOND THE FANTASY

This stunning celebration of one of Japan's most breathtaking artists contains nearly 400 illustrations and photos from Amano's incredible career, spanning projects like Vampire Hunter D, Final Fantasy, and DC Comics' *The Sandman*.

$49.99
darkhorse.com

The Good

Destiny developer **BUNGIE IS SELF-PUBLISHING** the franchise from now on following a split with Activision. Although Bungie will miss out on Activision's financial and development backing (including the work Activision-owned studios such as High Moon and Vicarious Visions have done for the franchise), at least Bungie gets to keep the intellectual property, unlike when Halo stayed with Microsoft. Activision recently said Destiny 2 wasn't performing up to expectations, so perhaps the split is best for both parties.

Quotable

> "In the long-term, perhaps our focus as a business could shift away from home consoles – flexibility is just as important as ingenuity."

Nintendo president **Shuntaro Furukawa** in an interview with Japanese newspaper Nikkei

The Bad

A bizarre **OVERWATCH** saga has erupted after a pro player created a fake account named "Ellie," signed them to the Second Wind competitive esports team, and brought them up the leaderboards. Along the way, Ellie's authenticity was questioned, threats and doxxing occured, and the whole ruse turned out to be a "social experiment" by a perpetrator who at the time of this writing remains unknown.

The exact motivations have yet to be spelled out, but the situation has revealed both those who would rally around and against women pro players. It also makes the official Overwatch Contenders league and Second Wind look bad, and doesn't do any favors to current and future professional women Overwatch players.

The Ugly

ELECTRONIC ARTS has canceled its open-world Star Wars title, according to a report by Kotaku. The game was originally a story-based title developed by internal studio Visceral Games (Dead Space) before EA switched the unnamed game's focus and closed down Visceral. EA is reportedly reducing the scope of the game, and Respawn's post-Episode III Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order is still expected this year, but this latest news is continued evidence that EA has badly mismanaged the license.

March2019

GAME RELEASES

Friday 01
- Dead or Alive 6 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- ToeJam & Earl: Back in the Groove (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, Mac)

Tuesday 05
- Left Alive (PS4, PC)

Thursday 07
- Total War: Three Kingdoms (PC)

Friday 08
- Devil May Cry 5 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn (3DS)

Tuesday 12
- Caligula Effect: Overdose (PS4, Switch, PC)

Friday 15
- The Division 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Saturday 16
- One Piece: World Seeker (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 21
- The Sinking City (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 22
- Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

Tuesday 26
- Danganronpa Trilogy (PS4)
- The Princess Guide (PS4, Switch)

Friday 29
- Yoshi's Crafted World (Switch)
- Tropico 6 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 08
- Captain Marvel (theaters) ❷

Sunday 10
- American Gods (Starz)

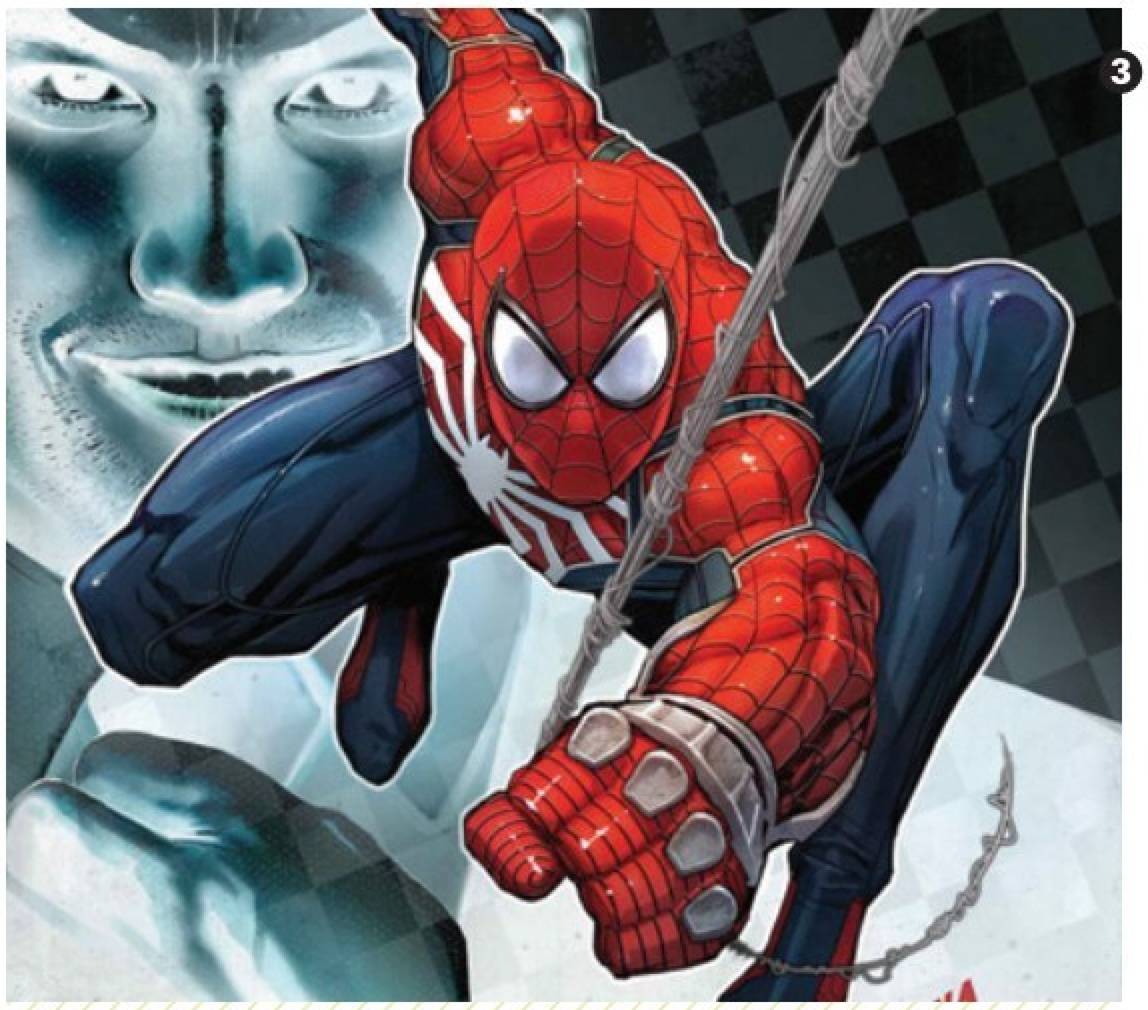
Monday 12
- The Village (NBC)

Friday 15
- The Hummingbird Project (theaters)
- Turn Up Charlie (Netflix)

Monday 18
- The Fix (ABC)

Wednesday 20
- The Act (Hulu)

Friday 29
- Dumbo (theaters)



GAMER CULTURE

Friday 01

A Month Of Spider-Man ❸

Spider-Man debuted in 1962, and he hasn't aged much since then. But what if he did? In Spider-Man: Life Story, writer Chip Zdarsky is showing us what would have happened if Peter Parker would have aged realistically over time. The first issue of this 40-page limited series hits today. This month, Marvel is also releasing a comic book adaptation of Insomniac's Spider-Man game called Spider-Man: City at War. This retelling will also feature story moments not seen in the game.

Thursday 14

Emerald City Comic Con

Last year over 95,000 people flocked to Seattle, Washington to attend Emerald City Comic Con. This four-day show focuses on movies, comic books, television, and video games. Autograph signings, panels, tournaments, and cosplay are just some of things to look forward to. Gwendoline Christie, Nolan North, and Laura Bailey are just a few of the guests that will be on hand.

Monday 18

GDC 2019

A large contingent of the video game industry is in San Francisco this weekend for the annual Game Developer's Conference. Along with a panel that shows how Insomniac's Spider-Man was made, Niantic will discuss the future of AR games, and you can even journey to the past to learn how Lemmings came to be. The convention runs for five days, and concludes with the Independent Games Festival and Choice Awards.

Thursday 28

PAX East

If you're looking for a fun weekend of gaming and pin trading, head to Boston for PAX, a fan convention that is filled to the hilt with things to do. This year's show features a console freeplay zone, a PC area, a tournament arena, an indie showcase, a massive tabletop area, and more. ◈

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Private Division

» DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

» RELEASE
2019

the new MODERN PULP

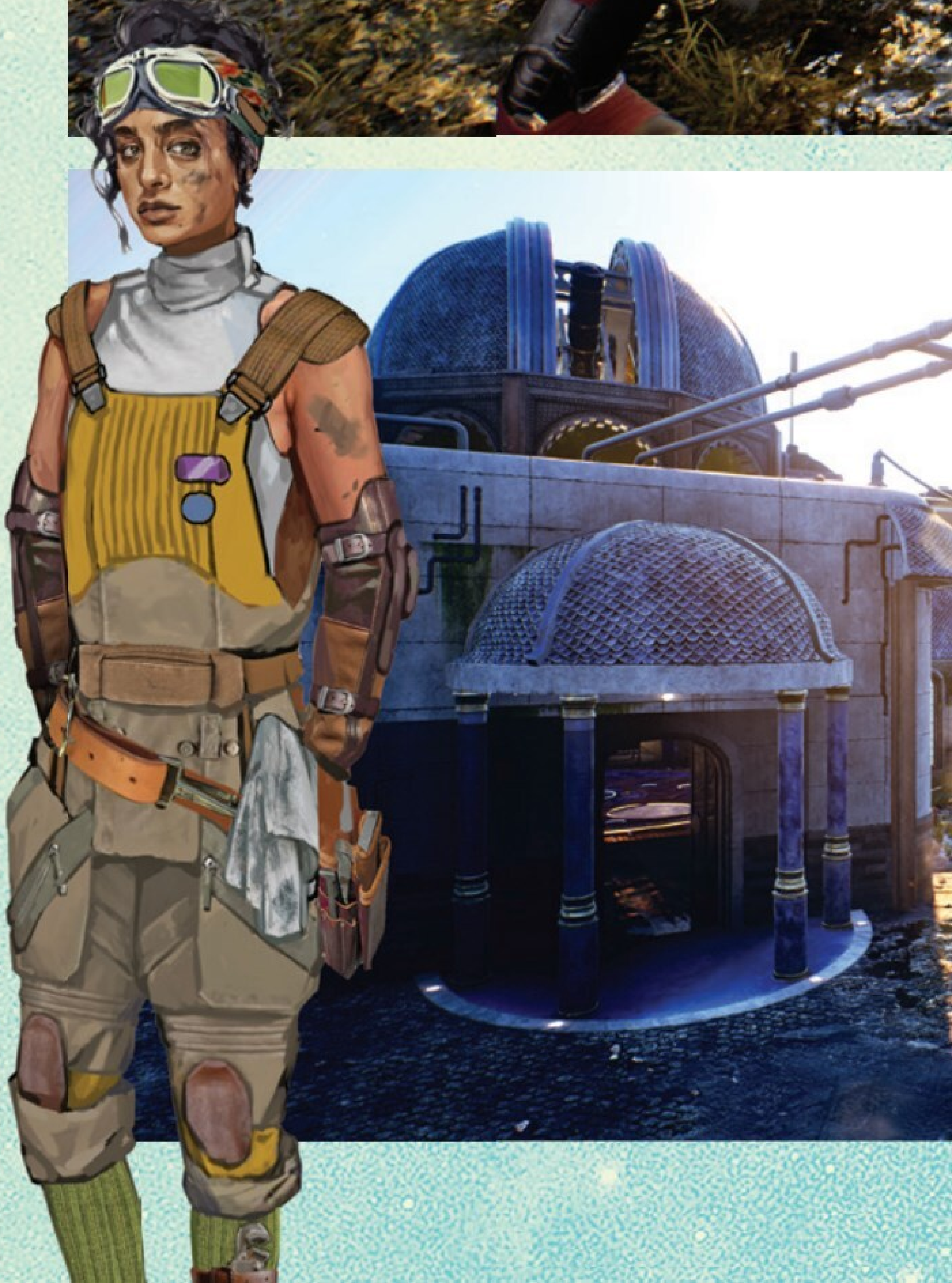
Charting a course to
THE OUTER WORLDS
with the creators of Fallout

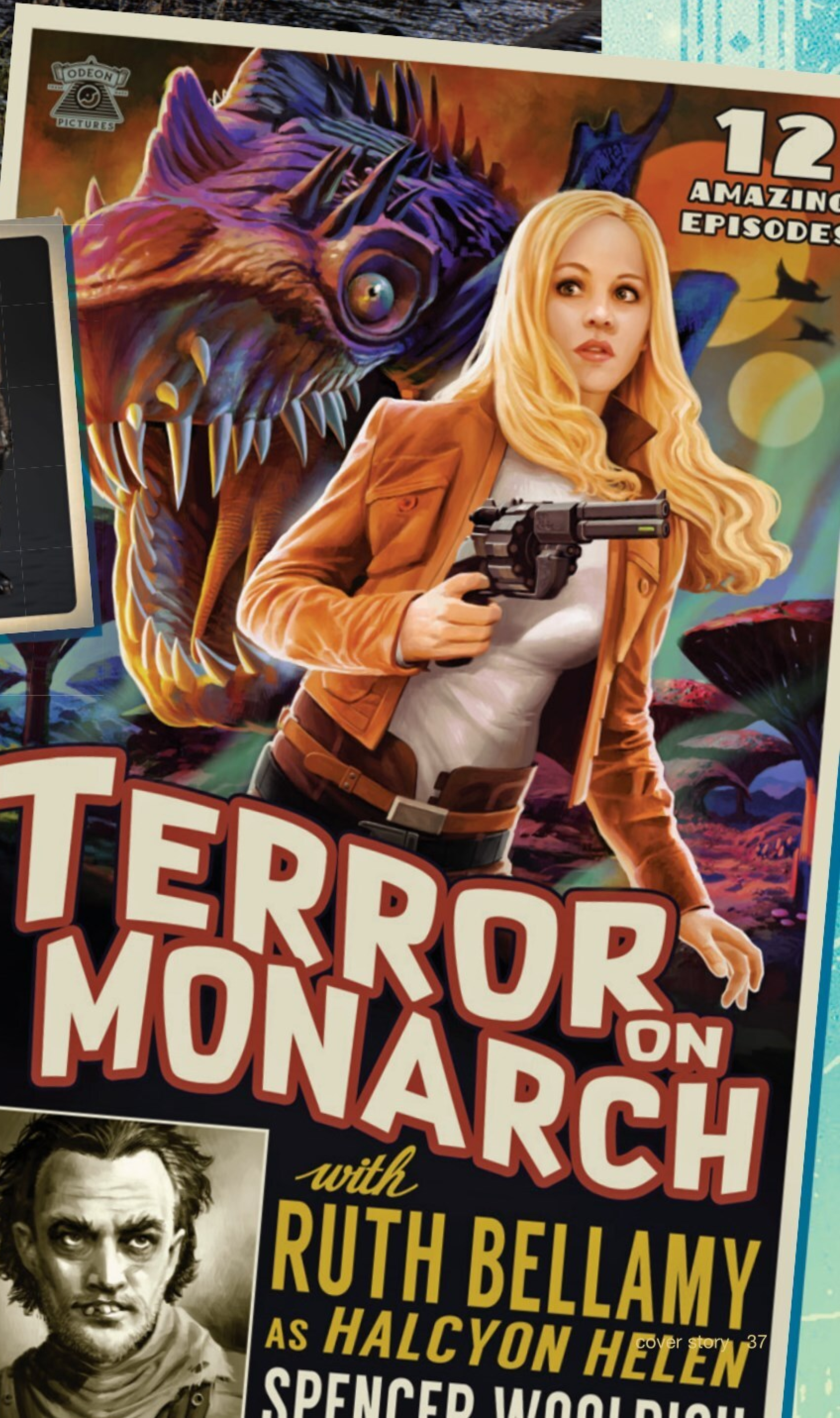
BY MATT MILLER

More than 20 years ago, a team of developers came together and crafted one of the most innovative and influential games in history.

Fallout offered freedom to shape the outcome of its story in a way few other games had done, much less attempted to do. It was wrapped in a wildly original setting that melded dark humor, social commentary, and character drama into something unique. All these years later, Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky, along with Obsidian Entertainment studio head Feargus Urquhart, are once again working under the same roof, and a new universe is taking shape under their direction.

The Outer Worlds embraces the same irreverent tone and player-choice-driven storytelling that defined the original Fallout, now informed by all the intervening years of experience and design evolution. Inspired and shaped by classic pulp science fiction, it's simultaneously a rejection of the black-and-white morality that so often defined that genre. Here, players explore distant alien worlds with shrink rays and plasma rifles in hand, and travel between planets on a rocketing spaceship crewed by a team of misfit adventurers. But on those far-away planets, players face corporate malfeasance, rampant tribalism, and an absurd culture that is painfully recognizable. For every touchstone that reminds you of the past, you'll find something else tantalizing and novel. This is a weird tale pulled from a dusty dime-store novel, redrawn for the 21st century.




ODEON PICTURES
12 AMAZING EPISODES
TERROR ON MONARCH
with
RUTH BELLAMY
AS HALCYON HELEN
SPENCER

EDGEWATER
GENERAL STORE

The Order of Scientific Inquiry is a religious organization that dominates the spiritual life for many of the colonists

TOGETHER AGAIN

Co-directors Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky came to the game-development scene with different capabilities, but a similar wish. Both had fallen in love with the potential of tabletop RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons and GURPS as a way to let players live out a chosen fantasy, unbound by the restrictions of a preset character arc. At the video game role-playing hub of Interplay in the 1990s, the two tried to translate that freedom to the screen. In its earliest days, Fallout grew out of an engine Cain had been designing in his free time while also running various role-playing games. Many of the same people who were at those tabletop sessions showed up to a meeting room when Cain announced: “I have a pizza and an engine I wrote,” and the subsequent brainstorming would become Fallout. “It was about trying to give the player the ability to play the game any way they wanted,” Boyarsky says. “And the subversive things we would do that we thought were hilarious that seemed to strike a chord with people. It was this very mischievous take on everything, and we could get paid to do it. That really fired us up.”

In the years that followed, Cain and Boyarsky would find a kinship and natural partnership around the games they wanted to shape, right up to their current work on The Outer Worlds. “We have very similar sensibilities,” Boyarsky says. “A really important part is that our skill sets really complement each other. There’s very little overlap between our core competencies. I have ultimate faith in Tim when it comes to system design things and stuff that’s more on that hardcore end, and he has faith in me when it comes to art and writing. And we overlap on setting and world building, but we have very similar sensibilities and we love a lot of the same pop culture from when we were kids. It feels very natural for us to work together.”

Years after that partnership blossomed, The Outer Worlds is both a return to form and an attempt to create something modern and novel. This new first-person role-playing game catapults players into an alternate timeline and across space to discover the distant Halcyon star system, where a society exists that feels like an exaggerated twist on our own world’s foibles. “This is an alternate history where the era of the robber barons from the late 19th and early 20th century never ended,”

Boyarsky says. "The corporations have pretty much taken over everything. But they want to go that last little bit and make it the perfect society for corporations." A collective of companies joined together to purchase the colony worlds of Halcyon, hoping to control nearly every aspect of their citizen's lives. Things didn't quite work out. The colony worlds of Halcyon are falling apart.

It only takes minutes to recognize the inherent absurdity of this society, which feels like it's populated by citizens blindly looking toward their next pay raise even as the ship of civilization is sinking all around them. And yet, there's just enough familiarity hidden in the preposterous premise to give the player pause. "It sounds harsh, but people with a slightly different perspective could view our society that way," Cain says. "'What do you mean you go to school, you get a job, and then you work until you're a few years from death, and then you enjoy those very few years, usually with horrible illnesses that your insurance won't cover? That's your life? This is silly. There would never be a society like that. People would rise up against it!' So, we're holding up a mirror, to some extent."

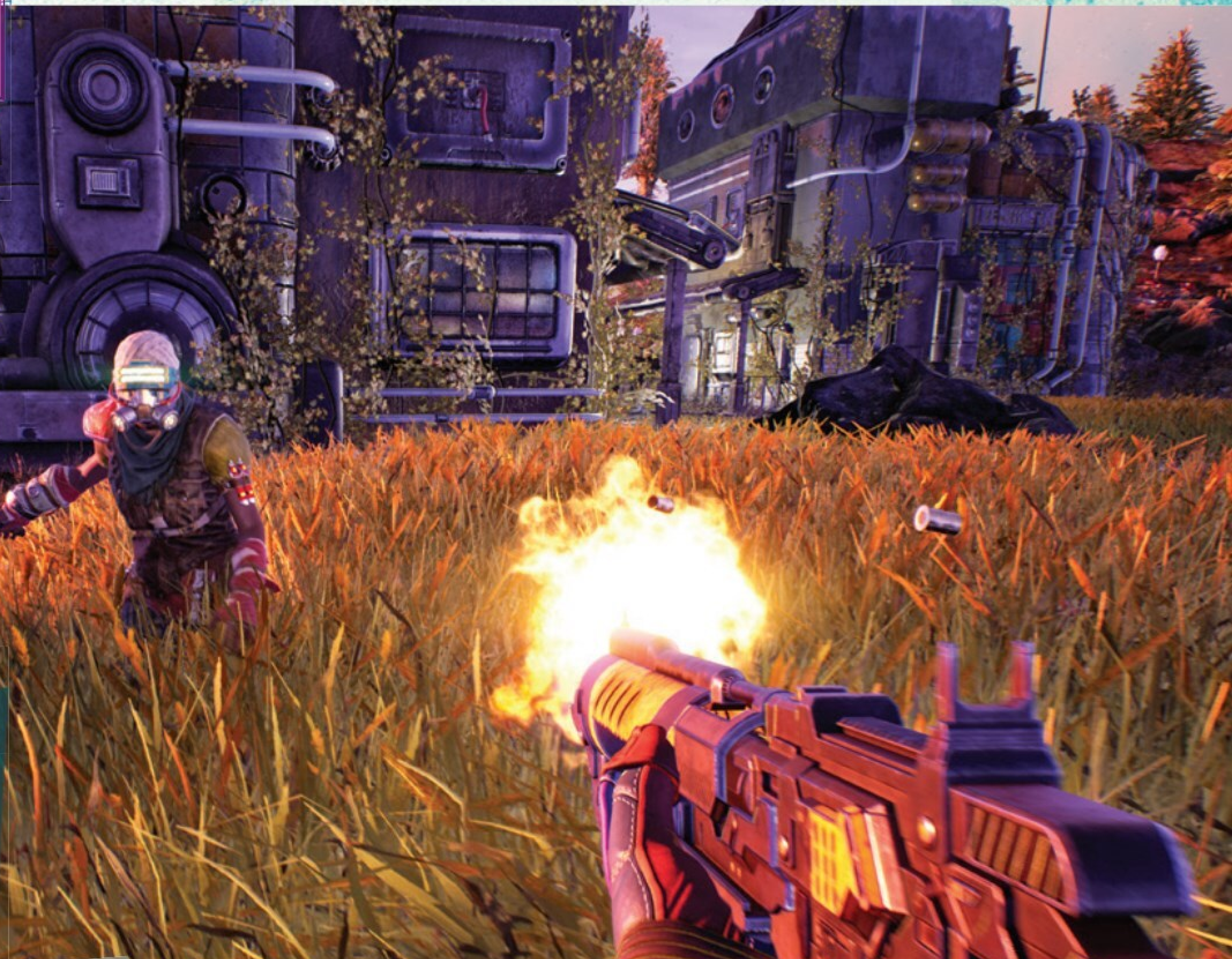
"But it really is just a game," Cain says, with a smile.

WAKING UP TO A NEW REALITY

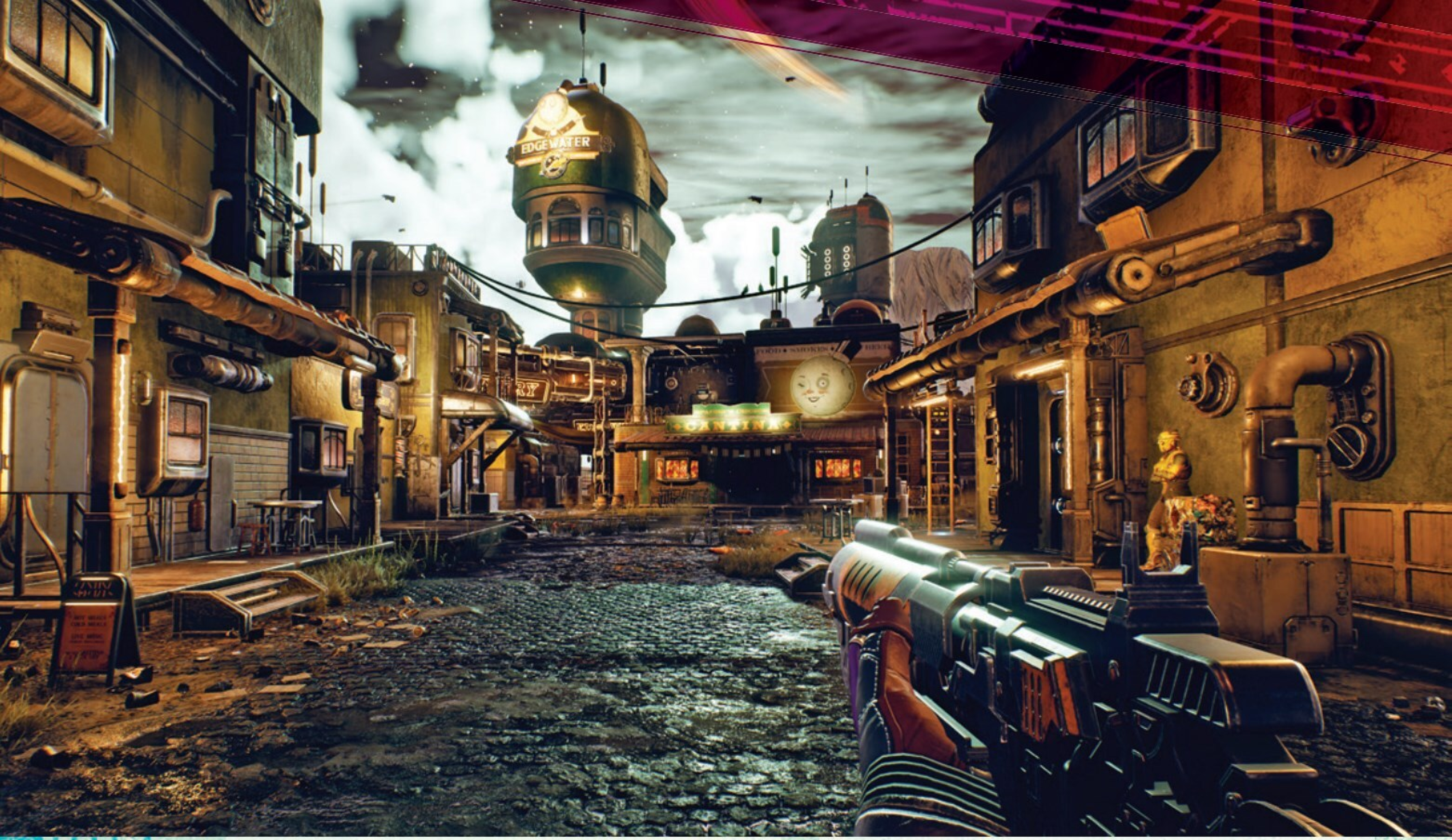
The first colony ship arrived decades ago and started to set up the new colonies. It was filled with farmers and administrators, teachers and corporate heads – everyone necessary to lay the groundwork before the rest of a functioning society would come in as a second wave. But the second ship arrived far too late, and the government decided to just leave the ship in a parking orbit where it wouldn't bother anyone. Things have been going downhill ever since. It's 70 years later when the experiments of an unhinged scientist bring one of the frozen colonists out of stasis. Decades out of the loop, you are that confused individual, and you become witness to just how screwed up corporate culture has become. "Unlike Star Trek, it's a dystopia," Cain says. "But unlike Star Wars, it's a dystopia that thinks it's a utopia. They think it's great, because they're all within it. You are the unplanned variable."

The nature of that unplanned variable begins with character creation. Rather than a chore, the team at Obsidian is trying to make that first hallmark of an RPG into an entertaining twist within the narrative. The rebel scientist Dr. Phineas

Combat can be dramatically slowed using Tactical Time Dilation, letting players consider their options



SPACER'S CHOICE
EMERALD VALE
COMMUNITY CENTER
PRESENTED BY SPACERS CHOICE



Wells breaks into the long-disused second colony ship called *The Hope*, where he rifles through colonists like they're playing cards. "Our approach to character creation is something I've wanted to do for a long time," Cain says. "Because we have that huge colony ship with all these frozen colonists, we show this cinematic of the scientist finding the ship and breaking in to these rooms of frozen bodies. He pulls up a station that controls an arm, and starts dialing things. As you are doing character creation and selecting attributes, this thing is selecting different frozen people, and he's making comments about them."

Slide intelligence way down, and Phineas wonders aloud how this one passed the basic tests to become a colonist. Boost up endurance, and he remarks how you might even be able to eat and hold down a whole saltuna, a disgusting salmon/tuna hybrid common in Halcyon's worlds. Each attribute selection affects related skills.

The Outer Worlds is a classless RPG; your character is built and improves in a freeform way, letting you pick any skills you think might be interesting. Perhaps as a subtle comment on the quirky notion of a character built to do only one thing, you also choose your would-be colonist's aptitude – a vocation assigned by the corporation – which would have defined their life had things gone according to plan. Jobs like "Elevator Operations Specialist" and "Beverage Delivery Technician" speak to the drudgery that might have been imparted upon colonists; the approximately two dozen aptitude options provide minor bonuses to your adventuring capabilities.

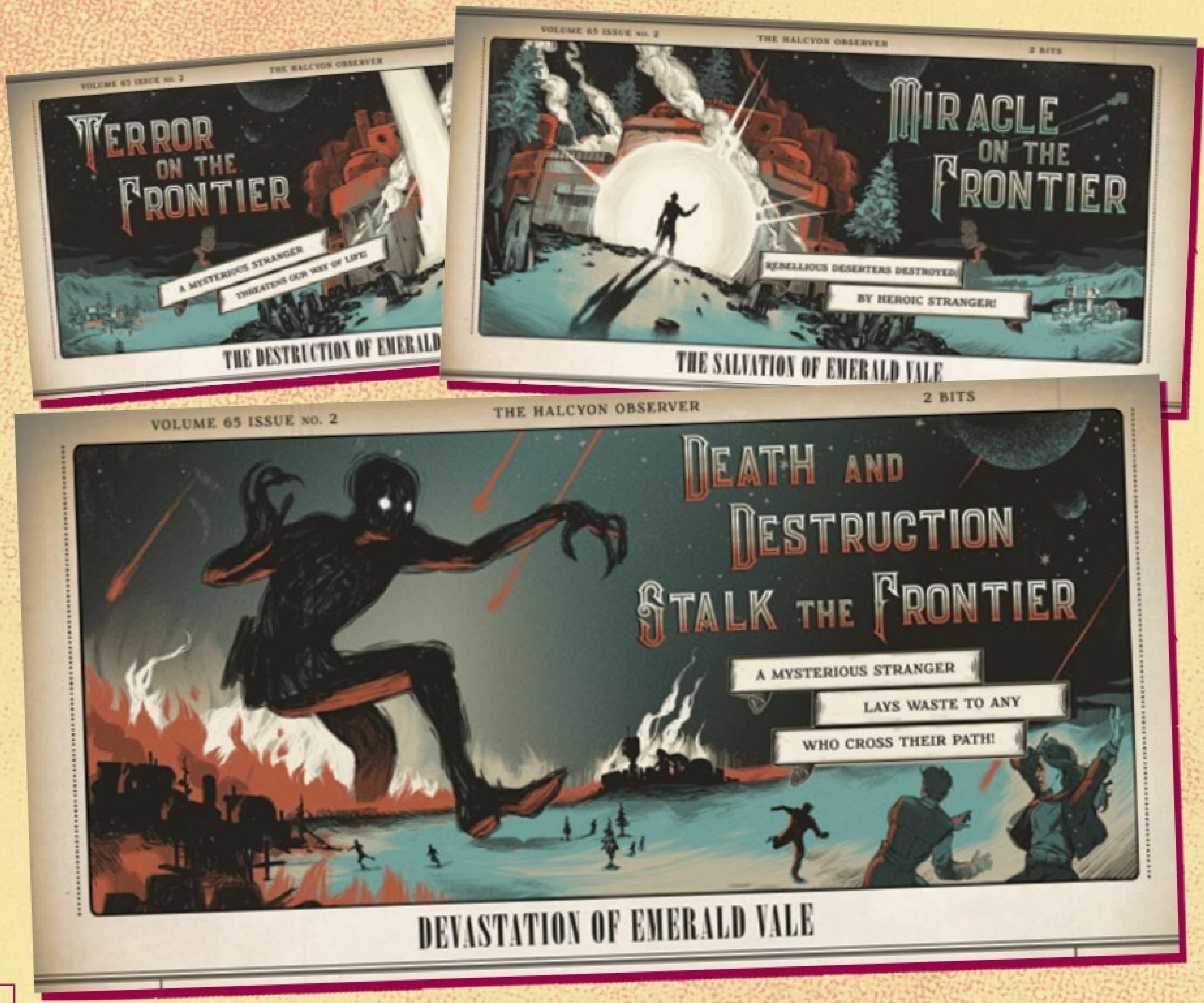
"Phineas has been at this for a while, trying to figure out how to revive the colonists," Boyarsky says. "He feels the government hasn't treated them fairly. He's been doing this in isolation for quite a long time, and it's driven him a little crazy. He's equal parts silliness and darkness, which is kind of a great encapsulation of our tone. He's kind of like a cross between Rick from *Rick and Morty* and Walter Bishop from *Fringe*."

Phineas wants to revive the thousands of frozen colonists, but he needs help to do it. His drive to bring life to all those lost souls is enough to send you shooting down to the planet of Terra 2 where the corporations hold sway, but that's not the definitive storyline you must pursue. It won't take long for the Board that runs the corporations to find you and make their own pitch. The eventual narrative could just as easily involve you betraying Phineas for a substantial bounty. "We took great care to not lock you into either one of those paths sooner than we had to," Boyarsky says. "We wanted the player to be able to play both sides."

"Phineas is worth a lot of money to turn in," Cain adds. "It would grease a lot of wheels for you. I'm not saying it's the bad path. But it is enticing; you can get farther along, earlier." In conversations with the two co-directors, this kind of interjection comes up again and again. Throughout demos and explanations, it's clear The Outer Worlds flirts with the gray tones of morality, teasing player expectations and daring you to try something off the beaten path. Things are rarely what they appear to be, and choices made by the player have far-reaching consequences.

Each companion has their own dedicated quest line, and their combat ability improves after it's completed

DIVERGENT CHOICES


VOLUME 65 ISSUE no. 2
THE HALCYON OBSERVER
TERROR ON THE FRONTIER
A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER
THREATENS OUR WAY OF LIFE!
THE DESTRUCTION OF EMERALD
VOLUME 65 ISSUE no. 2
THE HALCYON OBSERVER
2 BITS
MIRACLE ON THE FRONTIER
REBELLIOUS DESERTERS DESTROYED
BY HEROIC STRANGER!
THE SALVATION OF EMERALD VALE
VOLUME 65 ISSUE no. 2
THE HALCYON OBSERVER
2 BITS
DEATH AND DESTRUCTION STALK THE FRONTIER
A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER
LAYS WASTE TO ANY
WHO CROSS THEIR PATH!
DEVASTATION OF EMERALD VALE

The game's systems observe your activities in-game, and constantly look for ways to reinforce the sense of your agency in the universe. Loading screens like those seen here show off the way your interaction with a single area of the game might change the way propagandist media reports on your decisions.

The Outer Worlds is a shorter experience than some other recent first-person RPGs, but Obsidian is banking on broad player choice in character customization, storyline divergence, and multiple endings to supply replayability and engagement.

"It's the promise of a video game turning into a holodeck and getting to play whatever character I want," Boyarsky says. "That's something we really tried to tap into. The fact that you can give people the feeling that they can do anything, that it's this wide-open world. To me, it's what really excites me about the genre."

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

A new demo picks up shortly after the newly awoken character arrives in Edgewater, a community on Terra 2 run by Spacer's Choice, a corporation virtually defined by its shoddy products. "It's not the best choice, it's the Spacer's Choice!" their slogan reads. Edgewater, located in the idyllic-sounding Emerald Vale, is falling apart. Decades of corporate stewardship try to maintain a façade that is barely holding together for either the buildings or the people who live in them. The local saltuna canning factory has a supply problem, so the foodstuff now receives an injection of new minerals in the form of ground-up rocks. The fake window panels once hung to communicate quaint hominess have started to rust and tumble from the walls of the prefab structures. Nonetheless, the people here put on the mask of contentment, especially since the local sect of the Order of Scientific Inquiry religion enforces the dogma that everyone is in their right place, and it's heretical to divert from the grand plan. "Religion is very central to how the board wants society to run," Boyarsky says.

We meet Martin Abernathy, an old man who doesn't want anyone to know he's got a case of the plague. Old and sick individuals are less valuable to the company, so naturally, they're less likely to get medicine to make them better. When he realizes we're not part of the system, he begs us to retrieve a cache of medicine that sits outside of town in the anarchic area controlled by marauding thugs. After leaving to start the mission, we're intercepted by Esther Blaine, an actuary who knows about Abernathy's desires. She's convinced she can help more people if we bring the meds back to her to sell to other townspeople.

Town areas are mostly hubs for conversation, commerce, and exploration. Step outside the walls, and the broader Emerald Vale is far from safe. In our search for lost medical supplies, marauders who have abandoned the colonist life patrol through dilapidated buildings that recall a failed attempt at art nouveau décor. In some encounters, high grass offers an ideal opportunity to try out stealth. While crouched within the undergrowth, enemies show a triangle of awareness above their heads, and higher skill levels keeps them oblivious at closer ranges and situations. Lockpicking (thankfully without a minigame) offers a route into secured locations. The entire mission can be accomplished without raising the alarm.

Your ship acts as a home base where your crew congregates

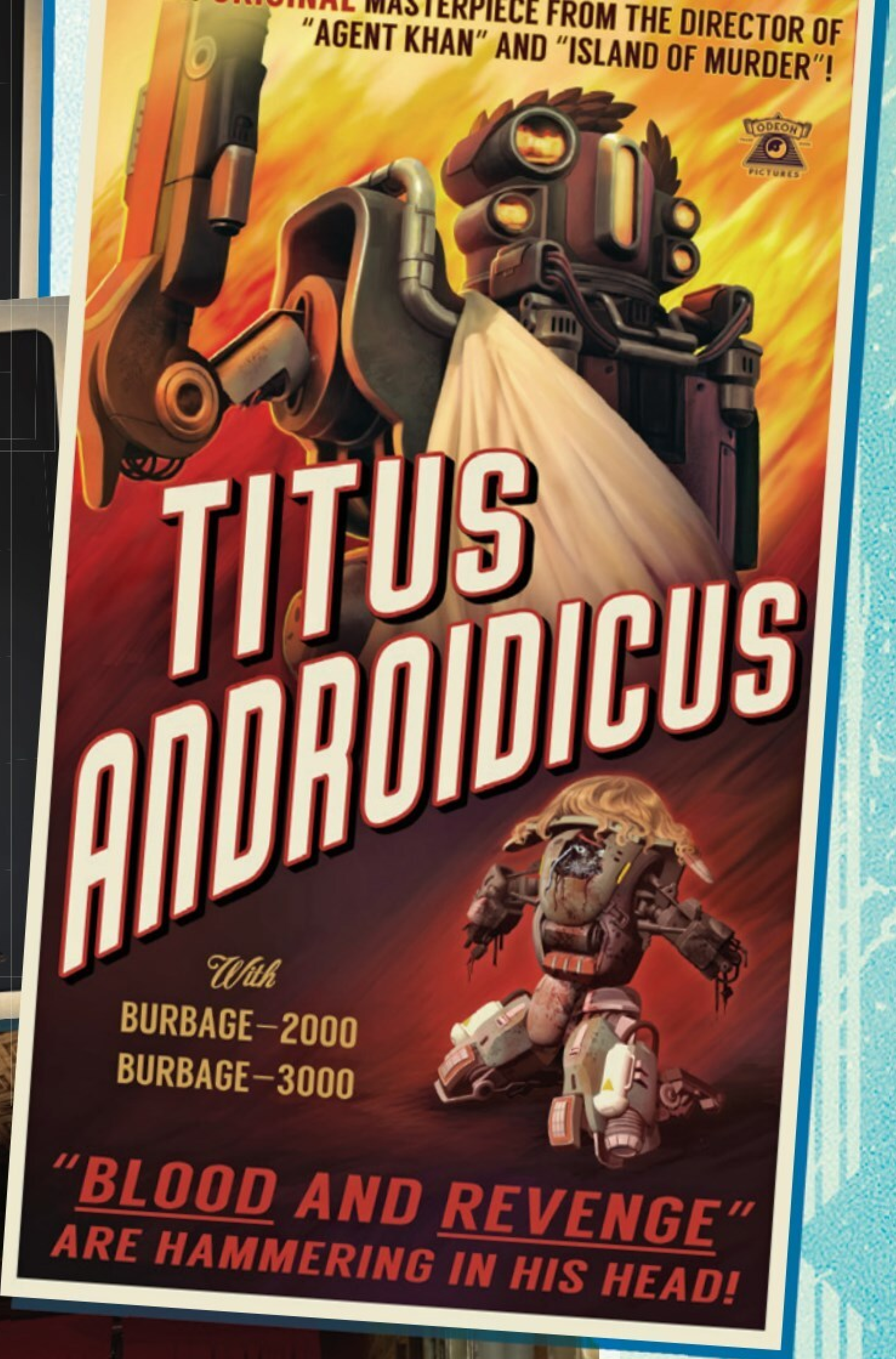
EDGEWATER
BEER
FOOD • SMOKES
CANNERY
CANTINA

When our character has had enough sneaking around, the action is prefaced by a tap of the button to trigger tactical time dilation (TTD). This limited resource is an aftereffect of the freezing process, and lets the character get a jump on the enemy during combat – ideal for both strategic players, and those who might not count first-person shooting among their best gaming talents. The special ability can be used to open a fight, or in the midst of a particularly harried exchange. TTD recharges over time, and it lends a tactical layer to each battle as you cycle through the wide array of melee and ranged weapon options. In the demo, a mix of stealth and frenzied battles with the deranged marauders eventually leads to retrieval of the medicine, but at every step of the way, it's clear the path we are witnessing is one of several avenues to completion.

The team at Obsidian values diverse playstyles as a central tenet of The Outer Worlds, and the flexibility apparent in the demo is emblematic of the game's broader goals. In playtests, the team explored runs in which the player is a true sociopath, killing literally everyone in their way, often even before they have a chance to communicate quest objectives. Likewise, the aim is also to let players chart a mostly peaceful path that requires little to no killing (though it is very difficult). In both cases, the game can move forward. Constant throwdown battles by one player might be carefully plotted stealth routes for a different player. Many quests can be solved primarily through persuasion, intimidation, or lying, if your dialogue skills are high enough.

That freedom of player choice is welcome, but it's also something we've seen before in other games. The Outer Worlds is exploring another playstyle that is a bit more unusual: leadership. Rather than spec-ing your character into high weapon skills, stealth, or conversation, you can alternately focus on skills and abilities that rely on your companions. Upon heading out into one of these alien landscapes, you can pull up to two named party members onto your team. Each has their own strengths and abilities, and depending on your leadership skill, a percentage of those companion capabilities are transferred to you. "With a leader character, it's an interesting jack-of-all-trades," Cain says. "You can change your playstyle on the fly based on who you bring with you. Some people complement their skills with their companions, while other players will augment." Improve an already-great ranged long gun skill, or bring someone who can help improve your chances of tackling that tricky engineering problem in town, which your character on their own might be ill-suited to confront. "It's a really interesting style of play, but it makes you pay attention to your companions," Cain continues. "What weapons and equipment you've given them, and what their tagged skills are."

While it's perfectly okay to play the game as a lone wolf with no companions at your side, bringing party members to a challenging encounter can turn the tide. Each one employs a particularly potent special combat ability; in our demo, we meet Parvati, a somewhat naïve mechanic from Edgewater who smashes into her opponents with an impressive giant hammer. When her ability is triggered, the action briefly cuts away to see her big moment. She's one of a larger cast of characters who join your crew, and eventually settle in aboard your spaceship. Later in the game players meet Ellie, a professional gun-for-hire with a dodgy past – her pragmatism shines through and an easy-going nature is apparent from even short conversations. Meanwhile, Felix is a young man who is ready to fight the system. The game's writers like to refer to him as a rebel without a cause or clue. He's aggressively idealistic, and feels alienated by a society that wants to lock him into a life he never asked for. In fact, that trait unites these and the other companions that join the crew as you travel. "All of these companions are outsiders in one way or another," Boyarsky says. "They are looking at the things going on in this colony, and they think it's crazy, too. They never fit in. Maybe it's not as obvious to them as it is to the player or their character, but as the game


MASTERPIECE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF
"AGENT KHAN" AND "ISLAND OF MURDER"!
ODEON PICTURES
TITUS ANDROIDICUS
With
BURBAGE–2000
BURBAGE–3000
"BLOOD AND REVENGE"
ARE HAMMERING IN HIS HEAD!

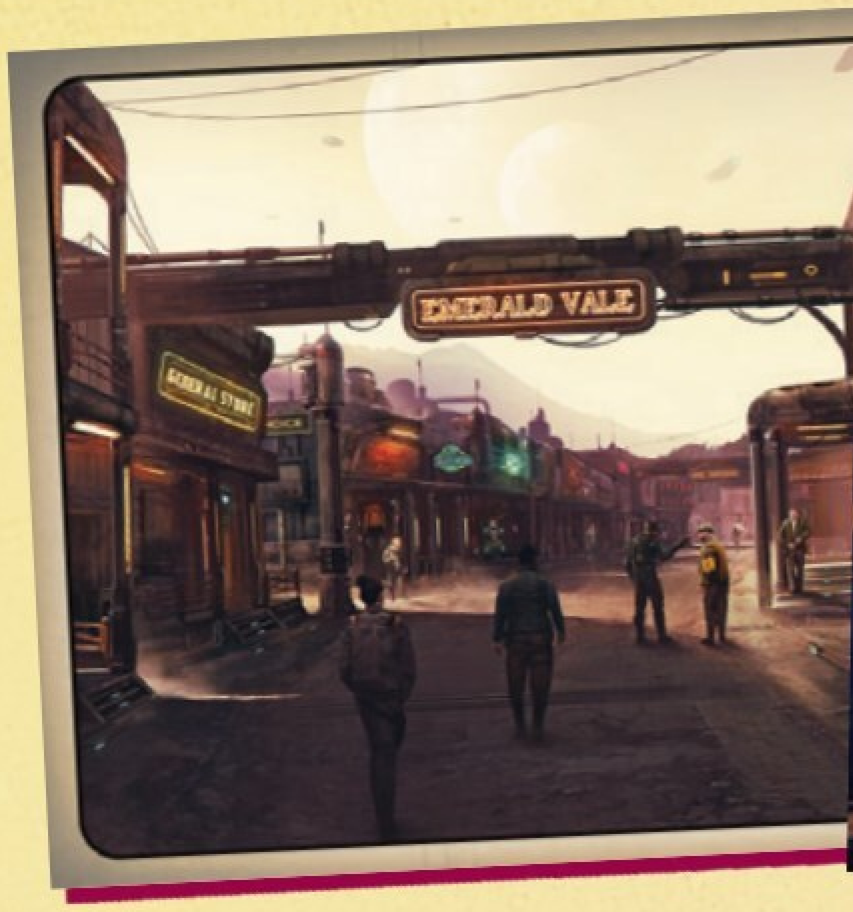
Some colonists have abandoned civilization (such as it is) and become marauding thugs on the outskirts of communities

goes on, they come more to that realization."

That crew wouldn't be much use without a ship to send them forth on more crazy space adventures. Your team of misfits will gather together on your personal spaceship, and each will have their own room and role on the vessel. "The ship is your portable player housing," Boyarsky says. "When you go to the ship to unload things or fly to the next place, you can interact with your companions, hear them talking to each other, and you get a really good feeling for who they are, even if you're not bringing them with you." The ship itself is a character in its own right. "There's a computer that runs the whole ship, and it has a personality, even though it denies that it is sentient," Boyarsky continues.

Your vessel contains a map of the system, allowing you to visit new destinations as they become available. It's also where you're most likely to hear your companions request help in their own lives; each has a brief but dedicated quest line that can be completed to unlock additional combat capability. And while your ship won't feature extensive customization or gameplay loops, individual rooms will adapt over time in response to your actions. In your own personal captain's room, collectible items you've found in the game will begin to show up as physical objects. Companions who have had their personal missions completed will also have the décor in their rooms shift. The ship is meant to be a hub, but one that is manageable and doesn't get in the way of the action. "In terms of size, it reminds me of *Serenity*," Cain says. "It's a pretty decent-sized ship, but you're not going to get lost in it."

ALL THE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE VISITING THE HALCYON SYSTEM



Take the Skip Drive!

It's not like you really have a choice. Humanity has spread out across the stars thanks to this remarkable technology, which lets a ship point in a direction and travel great distances in far less time than conventional forms of space transportation. Just don't undershoot! You could come out too early, and be stuck years away from your destination, like the *Hope* colony ship and its thousands of colonists.

Visit the Groundbreaker!

Thousands of colonists never made it to Halcyon, but those that did arrived aboard a ship that has since been transformed into a space station. Called the *Groundbreaker*, it's a hub for trade and communication across the system, sitting in the Lagranse point between Terra 2 and the Halcyon star. Just watch out for Sublight Shipping And Salvage – we hear they're not entirely on the straight and narrow as far as the whole organized crime thing.

Know Your Religions!

The Order of Scientific Inquiry applies a clear framework for everyone's lives, and that framework suggests you're best suited for staying right where you are. On the other side of the system, the Philosophists hold a very different view that's all about maintaining a flow with the universe, but watch out – rumor has it the Philosophists have had some internal disagreements of late.

Take in Terra 2!

The heart of corporate society in Halcyon, Terra 2 is home to quaint communities like Edgewater and Roseway, as well as the towering opulence of Byzantium, where all the most important colonists make their home. But don't expect a welcome mat to that esteemed urban center – authorized visitors only.

Capitalism Rules!

Halcyon is all about the triumph of capitalism, so bring your trader's hat. Ten enterprising corporations banded together to buy up this distant corner of the galaxy, and the governing Board runs the show. Whether it's Rizzos candies or Auntie Cleo's helpful pharmaceuticals, you'd best learn those jingles. And make sure you know the fundamental employer's rights.

Everything's Bigger on Monarch!

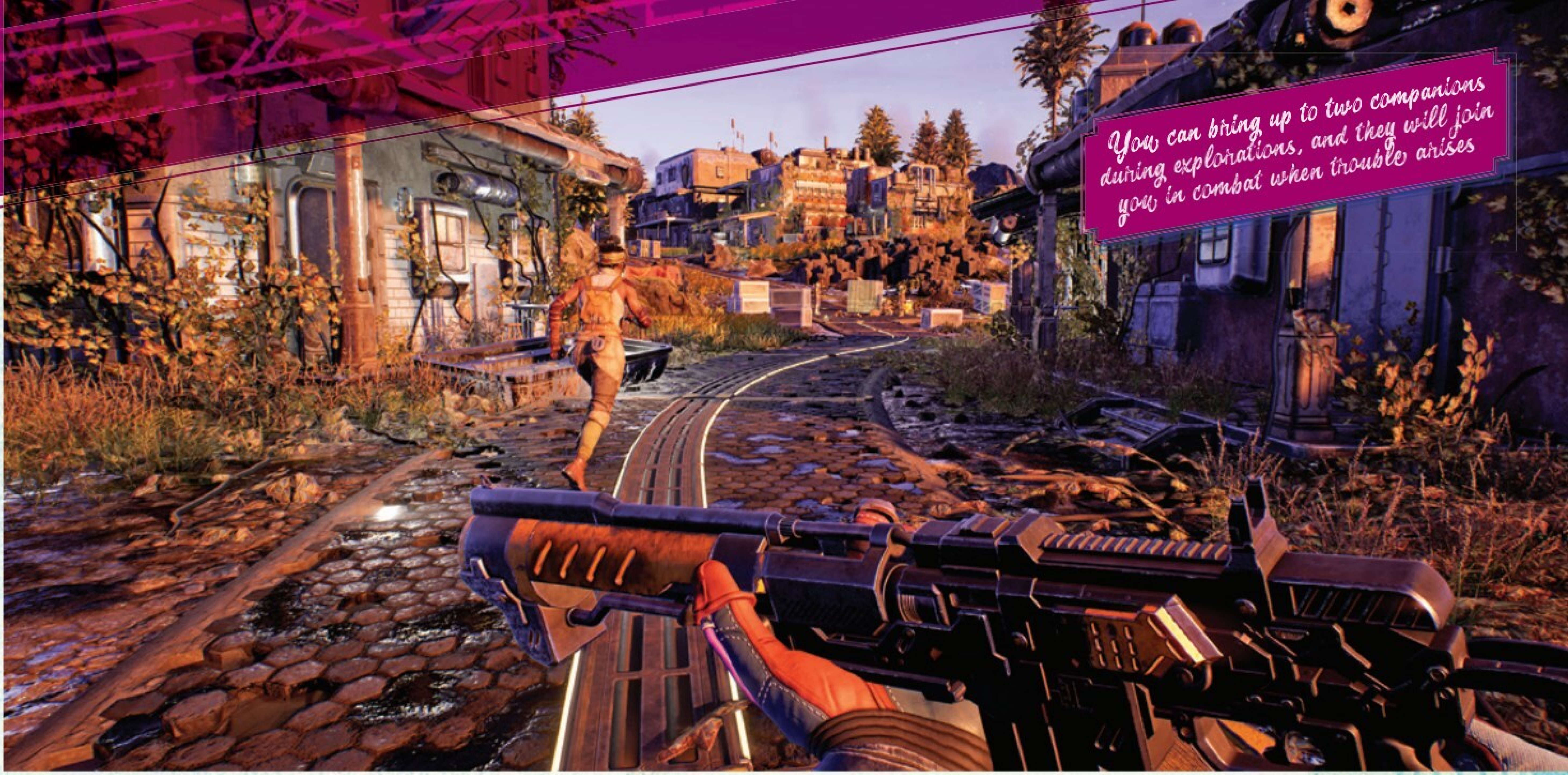
Terraforming didn't exactly work out on Halcyon's other Earth-like planetary body, the moon now commonly called Monarch. The gas giant Olympus hangs large in the sky, but that's not the only larger than life thing to observe. Many of the native creatures have reacted surprisingly to Earth technology, so expect some especially large fauna if you decide to visit. And don't be surprised if the people there don't have exactly the same take on Halcyon's governing Board.

Robots Aren't Sentient – Fire Away!

Robots may sound like people, and maybe even look a little like people, but they're not people. So load up your plasma rifles and don't be afraid to take some pot shots. They won't feel a thing. Though, if you're feeling less aggressive, we've heard they're also pretty easy to lie to in a pinch.

Tour the System!

Sure, there may only be a couple of habitable planets in the system, but there's more to see. Tartarus may not be hospitable, but it's a great place for the maximum-security prison located there. The asteroid Scylla houses scientific labs and a transmission station. And while you won't land there, you can enjoy views of the ice planet of Typhon, the gas giant Eridanos, and the mineral-rich Hephaestus, all from the comfort of your ship.



You can bring up to two companions during explorations, and they will join you in combat when trouble arises

TAKING SHAPE

As you rocket across the Halcyon system, your character levels up and improves along a range of capabilities, and just as you define the broader story, the focus is on letting you fully control your protagonist's progression. Attributes like Strength, Perception, and Charm can be rated between "Very High" and "Below Average," and the way you set those up establishes an initial set of skill bonuses. Below Average in any given attribute can lead to some challenging scenarios, but also a lot of humor. Tackle this space adventure with a very low intelligence, and new "Dumb" dialogue options begin to show up, including at least one catastrophically stupid decision near the end of the game. Take Below Average Strength, and melee weapons have a chance to hit, but instead of doing minimum damage, they might do none. It may end up being a tough trade-off, but those Below Average scores might give you the chance to really excel elsewhere, and may be worth it for some players.

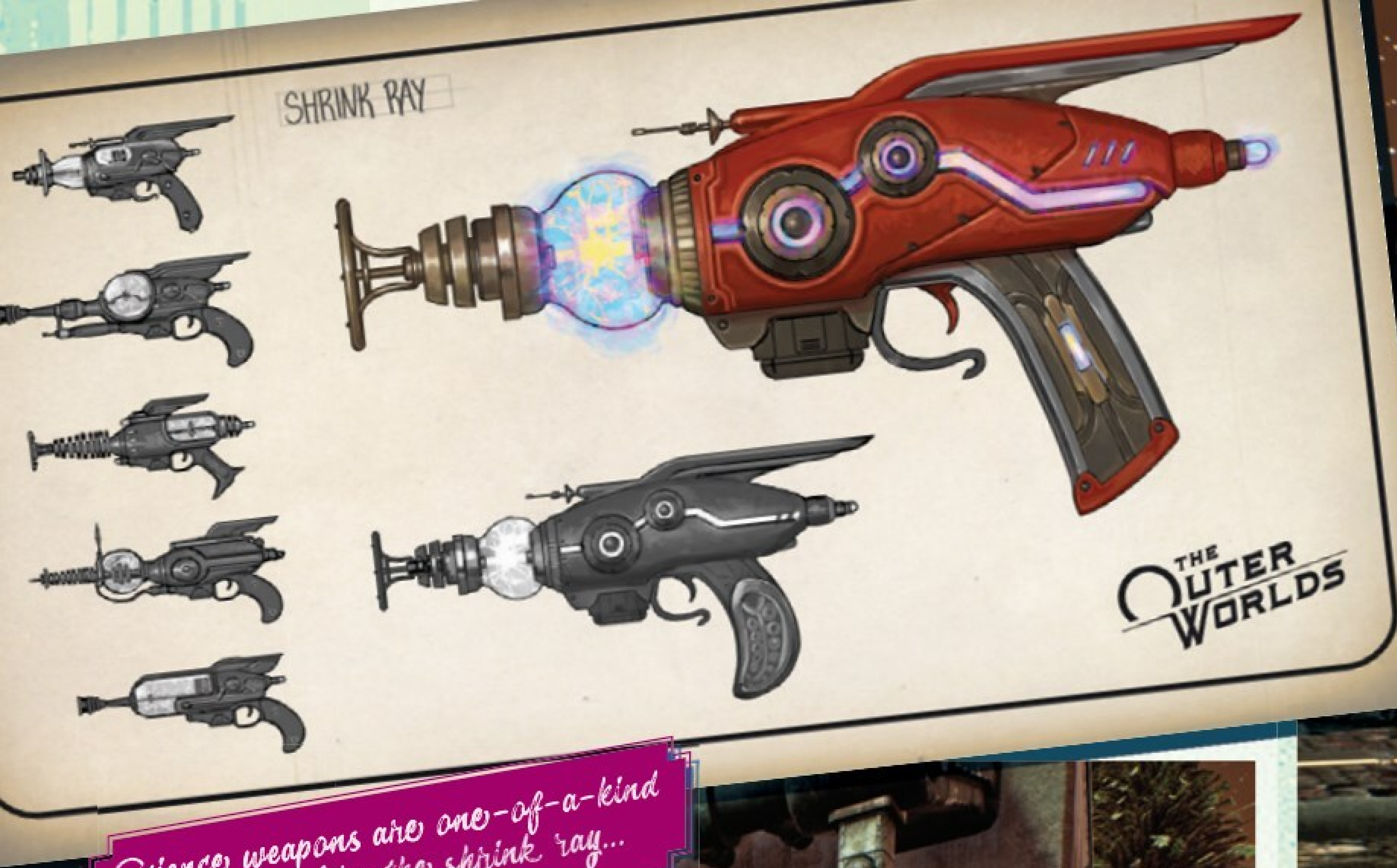
The skill system is built to encourage early experimentation, and support both generalist players and those who aren't sure exactly what they want to focus on from the onset. To do that, initial attributes inform the starting value for all your individual skills. Thereafter, those skills of differing values are each part of a larger bucket category. You may place points (which are earned when you level up) in one of those larger buckets to improve all the skills within, but once any one skill reaches 50, it no longer benefits from additional allocation to the broader skill group. At that point, you should hopefully have enough expertise to know where you want to specialize.

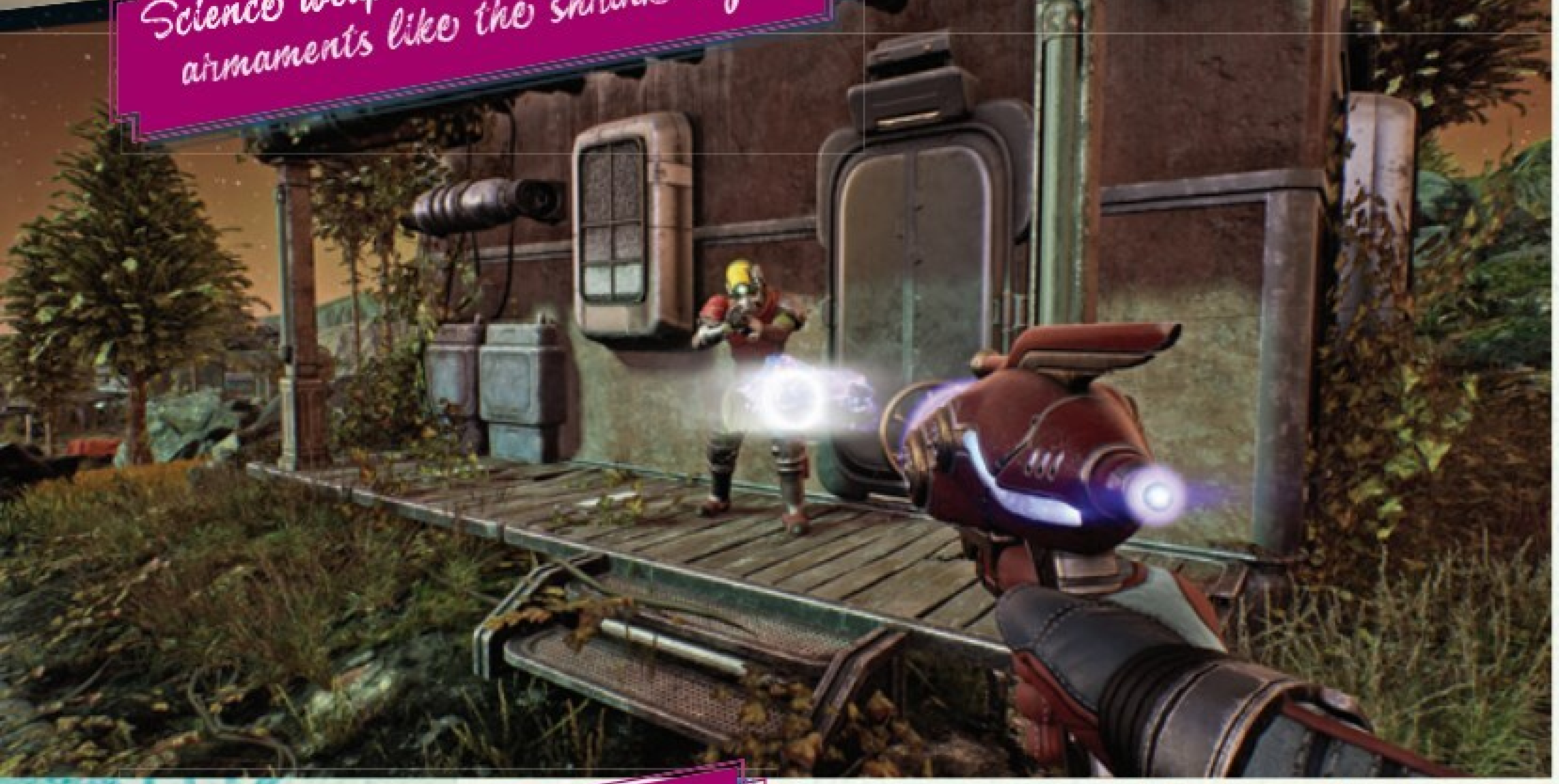
For instance, if you like the idea of a mechanically inclined adventurer, you would start by focusing on the Tech category. After investing heavily in that grouping of skills, your Engineering skill might be the first to hit 50, because it benefited from earlier bonuses during character creation. At this point, you could continue to put points into Tech in order to boost your Medicine and Science skills, but in order to further develop your Engineering skill, points would have to go directly into that specific skill. The same is true for the ranged skill set; maybe you don't know how much you like heavy weapons right away. Invest in ranged combat, and specialize later. The philosophy applies to other broad categories like melee weapons, defense, dialogue, stealth, and leadership.

In addition to new skill points to distribute as you wish, every other level brings a new perk. Echoing a similar concept in Fallout, perks are built to enhance gameplay that is untied to skills, such as faster sprinting. Since perks only arrive every couple of levels, it will be a tough choice to decide what's worth the investment on your path to level cap. If that choice seems daunting, you can gain access to a few more perks through a sort of Faustian bargain with the game – you can take a flaw.

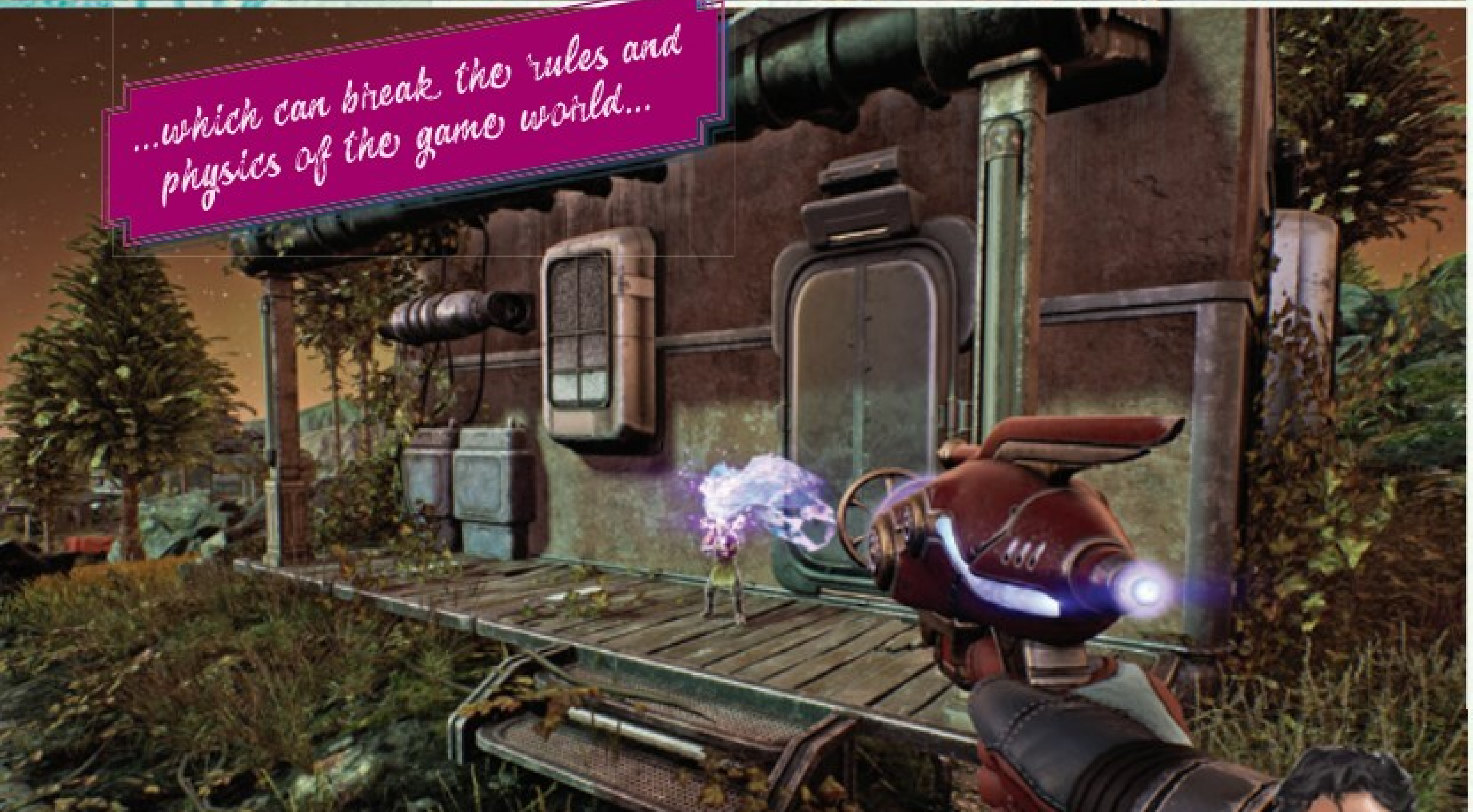
"I love the fact that Joseph Campbell said that no matter what kind of mythos you read, the hero usually either realizes he possesses flaws, or gains flaws along the way, and has to deal with that," Cain explains. "And I thought that is so antithetical to most RPGs, where you just become more and more powerful." Flaws are a counter to that assumption, adding an additional dimension to the role-playing, and demanding you face an extra challenge on top of the base level of gameplay.

"Because a big core pillar of our game is reactivity, there were already things we were monitoring," Cain says. "And I figured we could merge those two things. We could watch what you're doing, and when it passes a certain threshold, it will offer that thing to you as a flaw." Has your hero repeatedly gotten thrashed by robots? Perhaps you develop a genuine phobia of robots, and you must contend with lower stats when robots are around in the future. The choice to adopt a flaw is entirely optional, but it does immediately provide a precious additional perk. The game features four difficulty modes, from "Story" to "Supernova," and besides other substantial changes to the experience, the higher difficulties allow you to take on more flaws (and subsequently, more perks). On "Normal," the game holds you steady at three flaws. On "Supernova," it's up to five.

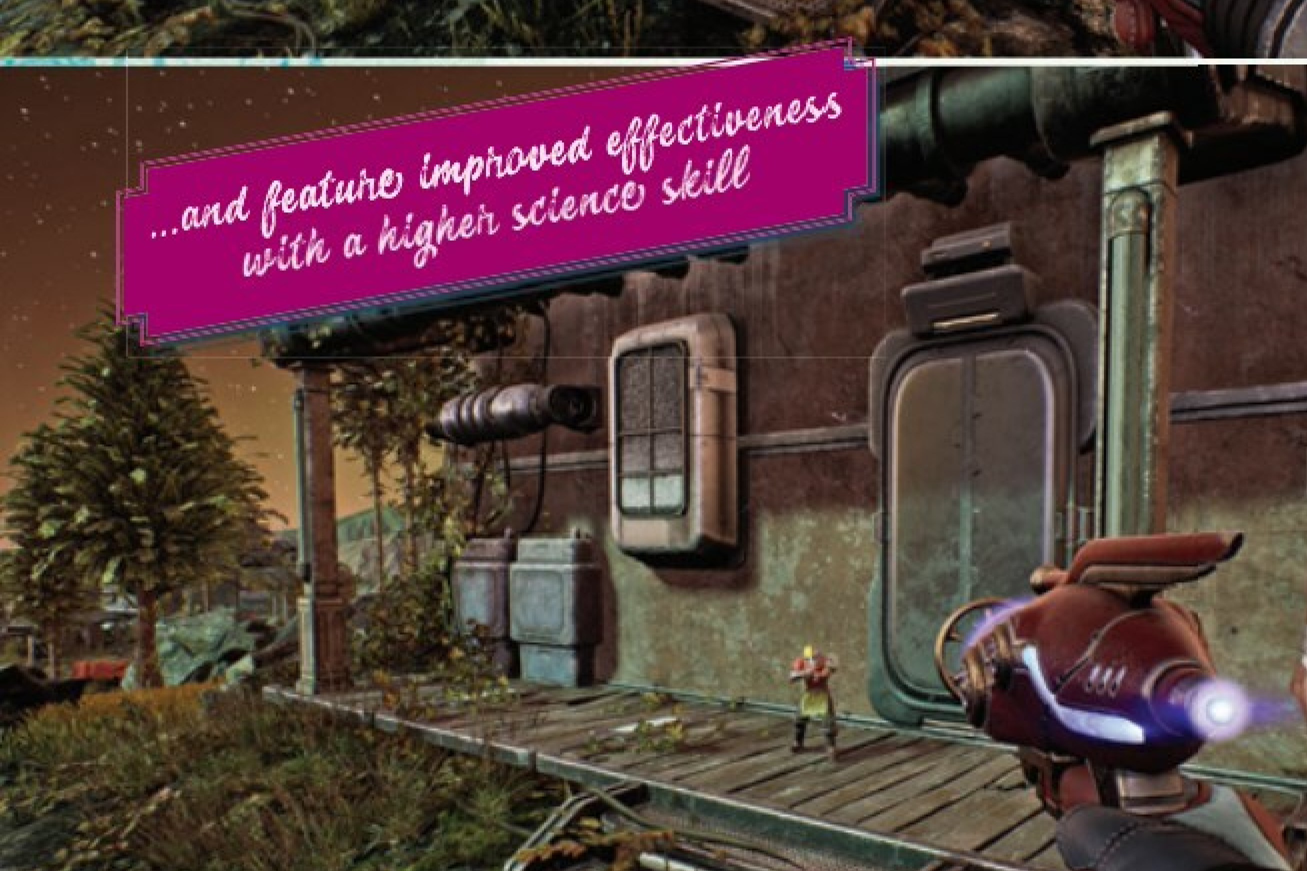




Science weapons are one-of-a-kind armaments like the shrink ray...



...which can break the rules and physics of the game world...



...and feature improved effectiveness with a higher science skill

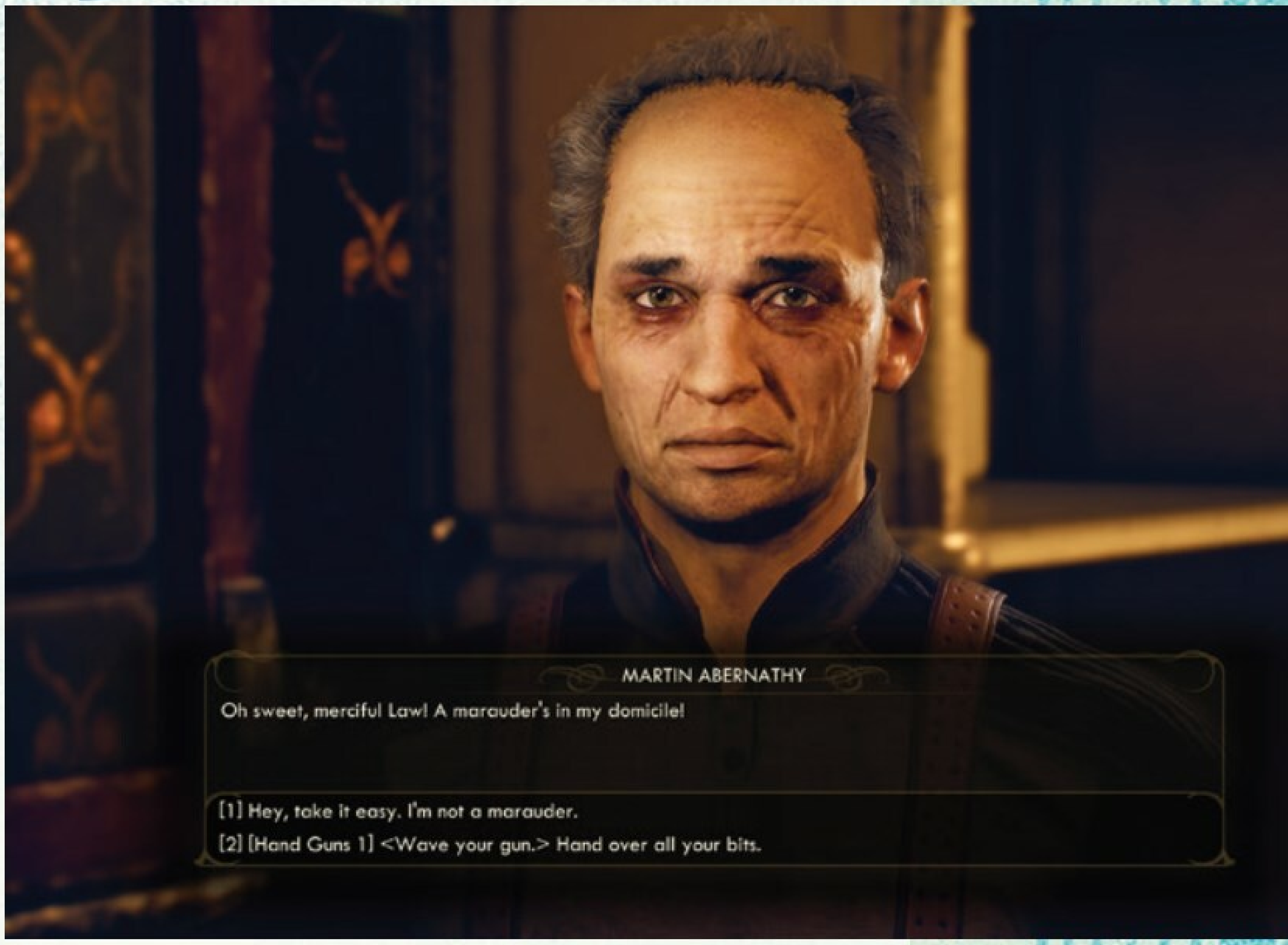
Beyond innate character growth, the cultivation of your own personal equipment is central to progression. Light and heavy melee weapons, hand guns, long guns, heavy ranged weapons, and a broad selection of different armor sets are available, and they often line up with the traits of the specific corporations that manufactured them. Are you okay with weapons that degrade all the time, but are easily replaceable? Go for Spacer's Choice. Prefer to stick with high-end weaponry? You want T&L, and their famously solid manufacturing. If you're all about modding, you'll keep an eye out for weaponry from Hammersmith, which features extensive customization options. "That's what we're hoping for," Cain says. "People will find a brand that aligns with what they like, and how they like to play the game. You as a player are responding to a corporation. Maybe you hum their jingle."

While a host of ultra-powerful futuristic weapons are up for grabs, the real treat will be tracking down one of the rare science weapons. These one-of-a-kind armaments break all the rules. "Science weapons are very pulpy," Boyarsky says. "We have a very consistent vibe and tone with our lore and how our world operates. Even though it's not real physics, it's internally consistent. And we allowed the designers to throw that out the window when it comes to science weapons." A single science weapon exists for each subtype of ranged and melee weapons, and they're all weird and over-the-top, and often hard to find.

While not fundamentally more powerful than other forms of attack, science weapons do something downright strange. "In some cases, these science weapons came out of bugs, like strange ways that things were animating," Boyarsky says. "We were seeing really weird stuff happen in videos, and we were like, 'We should make a science weapon that makes that happen on purpose.'" We saw one of these science weapons in action with the Shrink Ray. Looking precisely like a ray gun in an old *Flash Gordon* serial, the weapon takes any enemy in the game and scales them down; as their atoms collapse, they take damage, their audio pitches up high, and they look ridiculous. It's hilarious. But the effect only works while the blast remains continuous on the target, so coordination with your companions becomes essential for maximizing damage. We didn't see it in action, but one of the melee science weapons

SPACE'S CHOICE
EMERALD VALE
COMMUNITY CENTER
PRESENTED

The first attack while stealthed can do more damage



MARTIN ABERNATHY

Oh sweet, merciful Law! A marauder's in my domicile!

[1] Hey, take it easy. I'm not a marauder.

[2] [Hand Guns 1] <Wave your gun.> Hand over all your bits.

has been affectionately dubbed by the team as the Ugly Stick, and we have suspicions about what it does to foes. Weapons like the Shrink Ray and the Ugly Stick directly respond to a character's science skill. Pump that skill up high, and your Shrink Ray will make things even smaller, transforming towering dinosaur-like raptors into angry little cat-sized cuties.

Whether it's science weapons, flaws, or absurd dialogue choices fueled by low intelligence, Obsidian is clearly interested in engendering something beyond a simple power fantasy. Humor and absurdism flow seamlessly through The Outer Worlds, and infect even the way players are meant to understand their own character. At the same time, there's a self-awareness to the game, as if it's in on the joke of RPGs about spacefaring heroes and their insane exploits and how they can simultaneously be awesome and nonsensical.

STRIKING A BALANCE

More than many games, the ultimate success of The Outer Worlds may rely on just how deftly the team can balance competing expectations. A sardonic sense of humor is everywhere, but it only works if the player feels genuinely invested in the thoughtfully imagined worldbuilding. The social critique of alternate facts from competing factions and people who are willing to simply deny the reality of their own lives all shines through, but it works because it's tempered by the weirdness of a supposed corporate utopia. "The last thing that we wanted to do was to have a game where you have to understand these complex political or religious nuances, or make a game that was all about class warfare, intricate political struggles, and philosophy," Boyarsky states. "We like flavoring it with that stuff. But we don't want players to feel like that's forced on them. We like to dig down into the motivations of people and offer some social commentary, and mix that with the aesthetic of the really simplistic science and fun aspects of pulp fiction."

Our visit to Obsidian is also characterized by a refreshing lack of hyperbole about the scope and ambition of The Outer Worlds. Without a doubt, the passion and enthusiasm for the project was evident from everyone with whom we spoke. But it's also a game that knows the limits of a new franchise being created with limited development resources. "It's a shorter experience than some of the bigger open-world RPGs," Boyarsky openly admits. "And it's not a continuous open world. We go to a bunch of different places with their own individual maps. And even within those maps. For instance, Monarch has a big open area that is contiguous, but even when you go to the towns, there are loads. It's smaller, but it's tightly crafted, as opposed to this giant, enormous thing that is hundreds of hours. With our shorter timeline and smaller budgets, that will allow us to make something that is a more polished and crafted game."

Romancing your companions isn't in the game. Why? Because the team members we spoke with felt like they couldn't do justice to the concept this first time out. At the same time, as Cain and Boyarsky speak, it's all they can do to not blurt out plans for sequels and expansions that might let them further explore these twisted outer colony worlds. If the scope of this first game is limited, it's certainly not because the imaginations of its creators are holding them back.

The announcement of The Outer Worlds arrived with fortuitous timing for Private Division and Obsidian, as many RPG game players have been bemoaning a genre that seems to be moving away from the kinds of games they loved. The Outer Worlds may not be the answer everyone is seeking; but after days speaking to its developers, there's a magic at play in that studio that draws easy comparisons to the classics. And when some of those developers are the same individuals who once crafted those classics, it's easy to understand why. ◆

Learn more about The Outer Worlds at gameinformer.com/theouterworlds, where you'll find new spotlight features, interviews, and videos throughout the month

ENDGAME STRAT

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Massive Entertainment, Red Storm

» RELEASE
March 15

THE DIVISION 2 develops a new battle plan to keep fans engaged from launch and beyond

EGY

Content rules everything in shared-world shooters like Destiny and The Division. When players have quests to grind, exotic gear to earn, and vanity items to show off their exploits, all is well. When those expectations fall short, the salt emporiums open and vitriol rules discourse.

We all witnessed Bungie's trials and tribulations with Destiny 2, so the developers at Massive Entertainment and Red Storm have a great blueprint for what not to do when it comes to developing a sequel to a game packed with things to do. We've seen the traps and pitfalls that can anger a community that wants to play a game, but also needs a good incentive to keep playing. With The Division 2, Ubisoft hopes to circumvent these common frustrations and deliver a robust suite of cooperative and competitive content to keep its eager agents engaged well past launch.

We recently went hands-on with the game and spoke at length with developers at both studios to better understand their battle plan for the cooperative campaign, dark zone, organized multiplayer, and endgame designs.

by MATT BERTZ

A CAMPAIGN OF CAPITAL CHAOS

New York City is still in rough shape following the outbreak of the Green Poison, a deadly virus intentionally placed on dollar bills right before Black Friday. However, things would have been much worse if the sleeper agents working for The Division hadn't taken back the city and restored order.

Recovery efforts didn't go as well for the agents assigned to protect the nation's capital. Set seven months after the initial outbreak, the situation is bleak at the start of The Division 2. You assume the role of an agent from outside the city responding to a distress call. The agents are all but wiped out in Washington, D.C., newly formed factions are vying for power, and things are looking very dire for the Land of the Free.

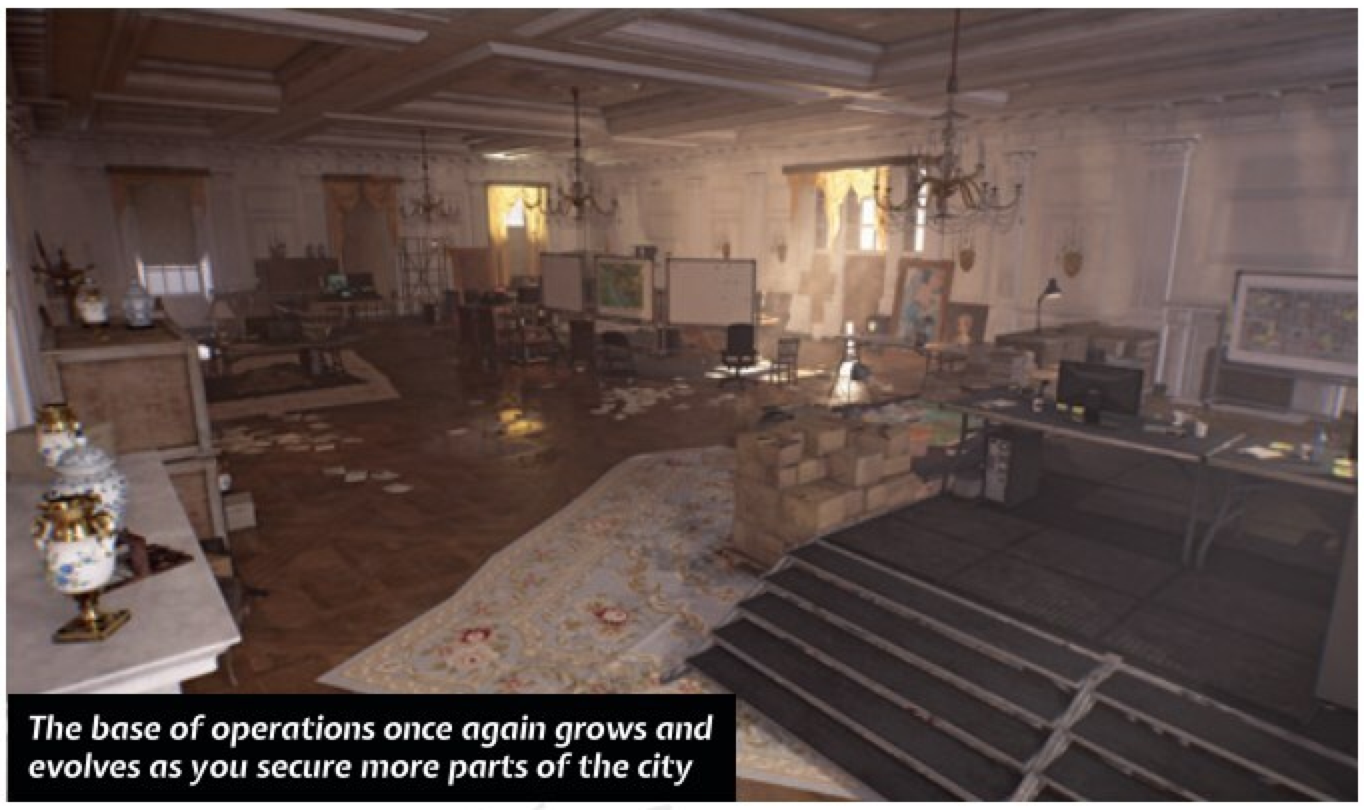
"If The Division was all about taking back New York and stopping the collapse, trying to find a sense of calm within this chaos that was happening around you, here the stakes are much, much higher," says Massive Entertainment creative director Julian Gerighty. "Fundamentally, if we lose D.C., we lose the country."

Given how much has already gone wrong, you need more than good intentions to restore the seat of power. The civilians are skeptical of the Division due to their previous failings, anarchists roam the streets, and packs of rebellious activists who feel abandoned or ostracized by the government are out for revenge. And then you have the True Sons, a paramilitary group who has capitalized on the chaos to seize power for themselves.

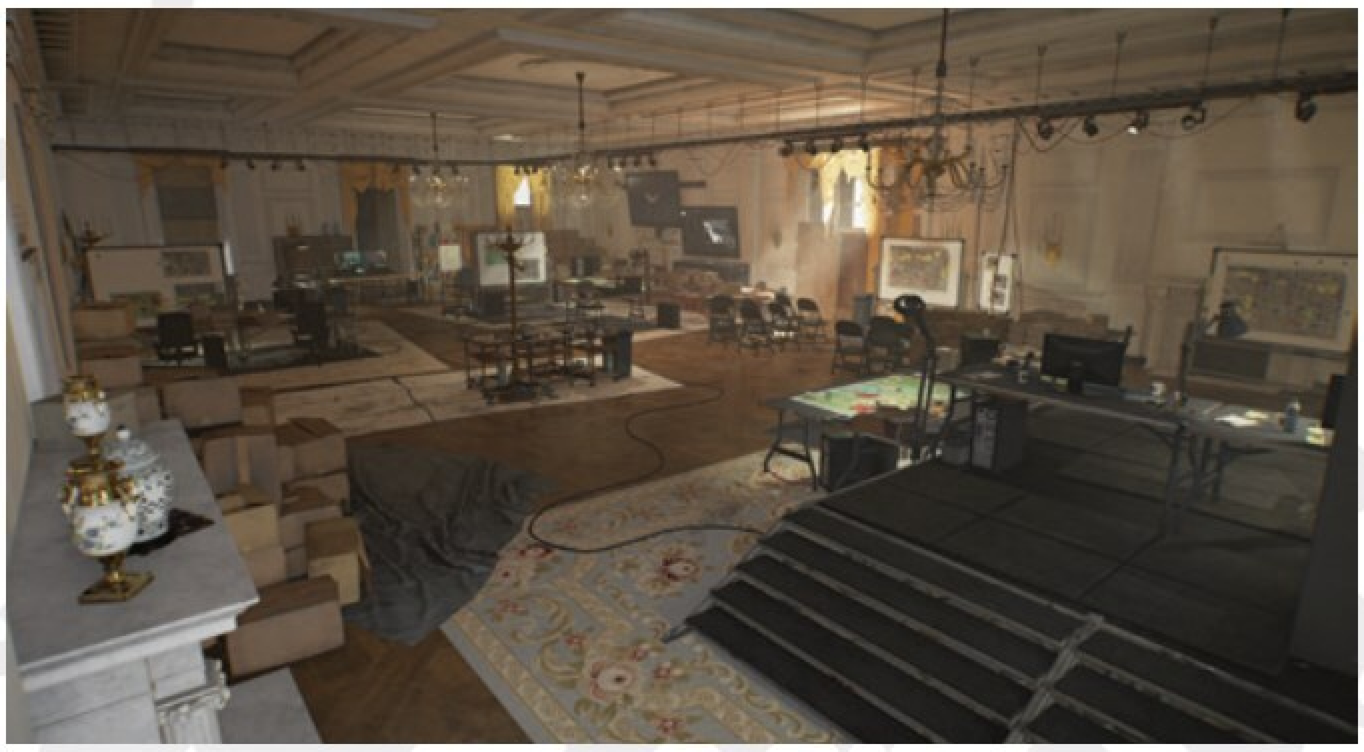
Your job throughout the 40-hour cooperative campaign is three-fold. First, you need to reclaim The Division's base of operations to establish a foothold. Second, several civilian settlements around the regions need help getting back on their feet. And finally, you need to reestablish order by wiping out the lawless factions operating in the vacuum. Along the way, you may run into some familiar faces. Remember Aaron Keener, the Division agent who went rogue in the original game and threatened to build on the deadly legacy of the Green Poison? You probably haven't heard the last of him.

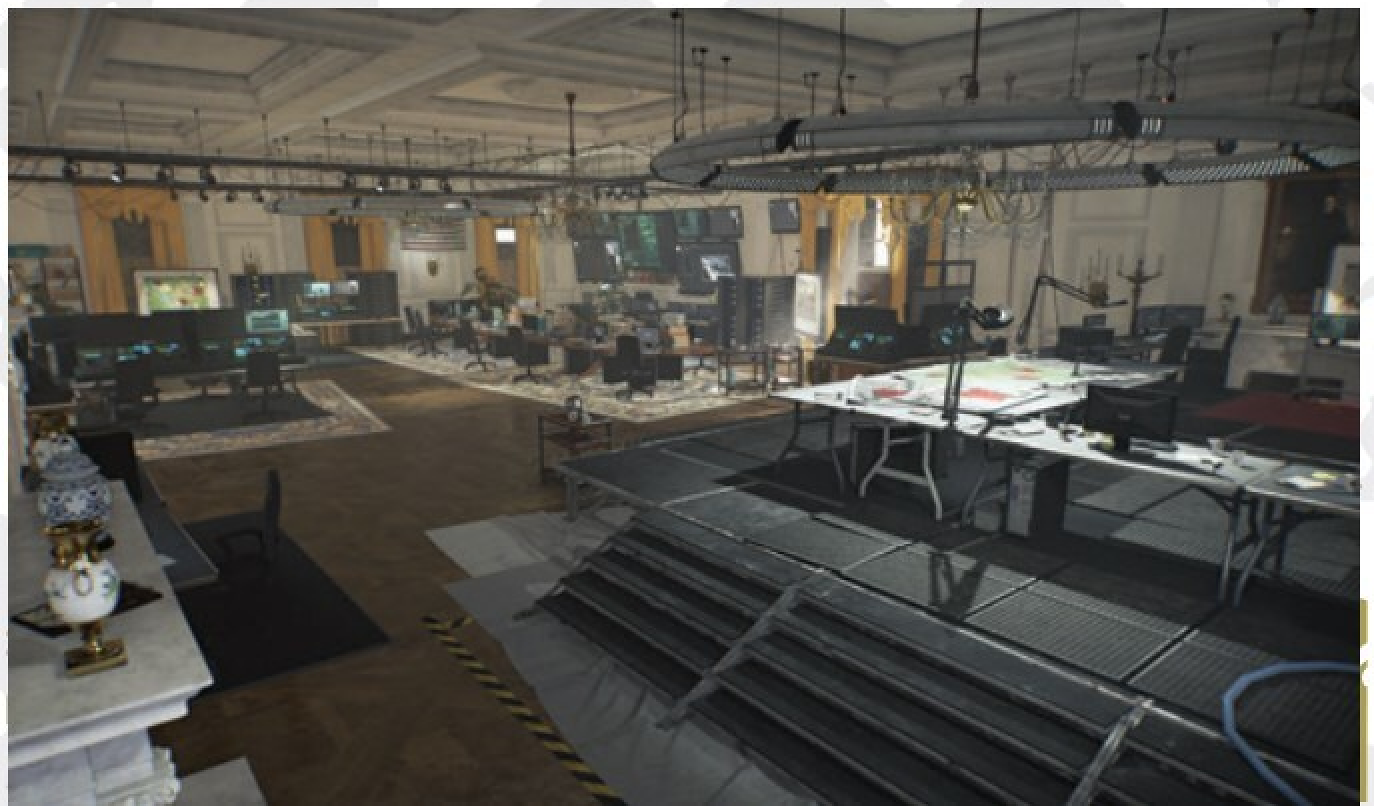
The campaign takes full advantage of the new setting, sending you all over the capital to visit landmarks like the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, World Bank headquarters, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, and the National Museum of American History. But The Division 2 isn't just a shooting gallery at iconic locations. Ubisoft has put an increased emphasis on the quality and impact of the side missions, using them as opportunities to shed light on the plight of the people caught in the gears of this massive upheaval. Each time you visit a new settlement, you can learn the desperate tales of how these makeshift civilian hubs came into existence.

As with the last game, The Division 2 campaign can be conquered solo, but it's meant to be played cooperatively with up to three other friends. This time around, you won't be splitting up as much. All the spaces in Washington, D.C. can be visited by the group – no more breaking up when you go into the base of operations.



The base of operations once again grows and evolves as you secure more parts of the city





NEW DARK ZONES, NEW RULES

In The Division, Manhattan had one especially dangerous area smack in the middle of the map known as the dark zone. Those brave enough to enter knew anything could happen in this quarantine space housing the toughest enemies and best loot. Even after fighting through tough defenses and acquiring a valuable contaminated item for extraction, an opposing squad of players (or even one of your own compatriots) could put a bullet in your skull and take the spoils for themselves. The riveting tension created by this play experience developed passionate fans, but the high cost of potentially losing a valuable item also drove many players away.

Ubisoft isn't content with the dark zone appealing to a hardcore minority, so it's making several big changes with The Division 2 in hopes of beckoning more players. First up, Washington, D.C., isn't just home to one dark zone, but three spread around the region.

Each of the three, smaller dark zones have a narrative-driven introductory mission tied to the campaign. During these private missions, you can explore the dark corners of the zones to your heart's content, identifying the landmarks, finding the safe rooms, and locating extraction zones without worrying about being descended upon by rogue agents. Once you complete these missions, the dark zones transition into being the dangerous PvEvP space we're all accustomed to. But having a private mission in the dark zone isn't enough on its own to tempt players to venture back into the danger zone. Ubisoft also made other changes to entice wary gamers.

Every item you recovered in the original game's dark zone had to be extracted by calling in a chopper to haul away the valuables. In The Division 2, the best gear still requires you call attention to yourself by shooting a flare in an extraction zone, but you also get a lot of loot drops that award items you can use immediately and keep. The guarantee of never leaving empty handed could go a long way to increasing dark zone player populations.

The seven months since the outbreak of Green Poison haven't been kind to D.C., and it's your job to help the remaining human settlements

You also don't need kill a bunch of elite enemies to collect dark zone keys before searching for chests anymore. Low on keys? Pick the lock of a chest and help yourself to its content. First one to stumble on a supply drop? Selfishly horde the goods and leave nothing for anyone else. Doing so places you in a rogue state, but it doesn't call in hunting parties to your location. Smart teams wary of PvP can flirt with danger on this level without activating a manhunt.

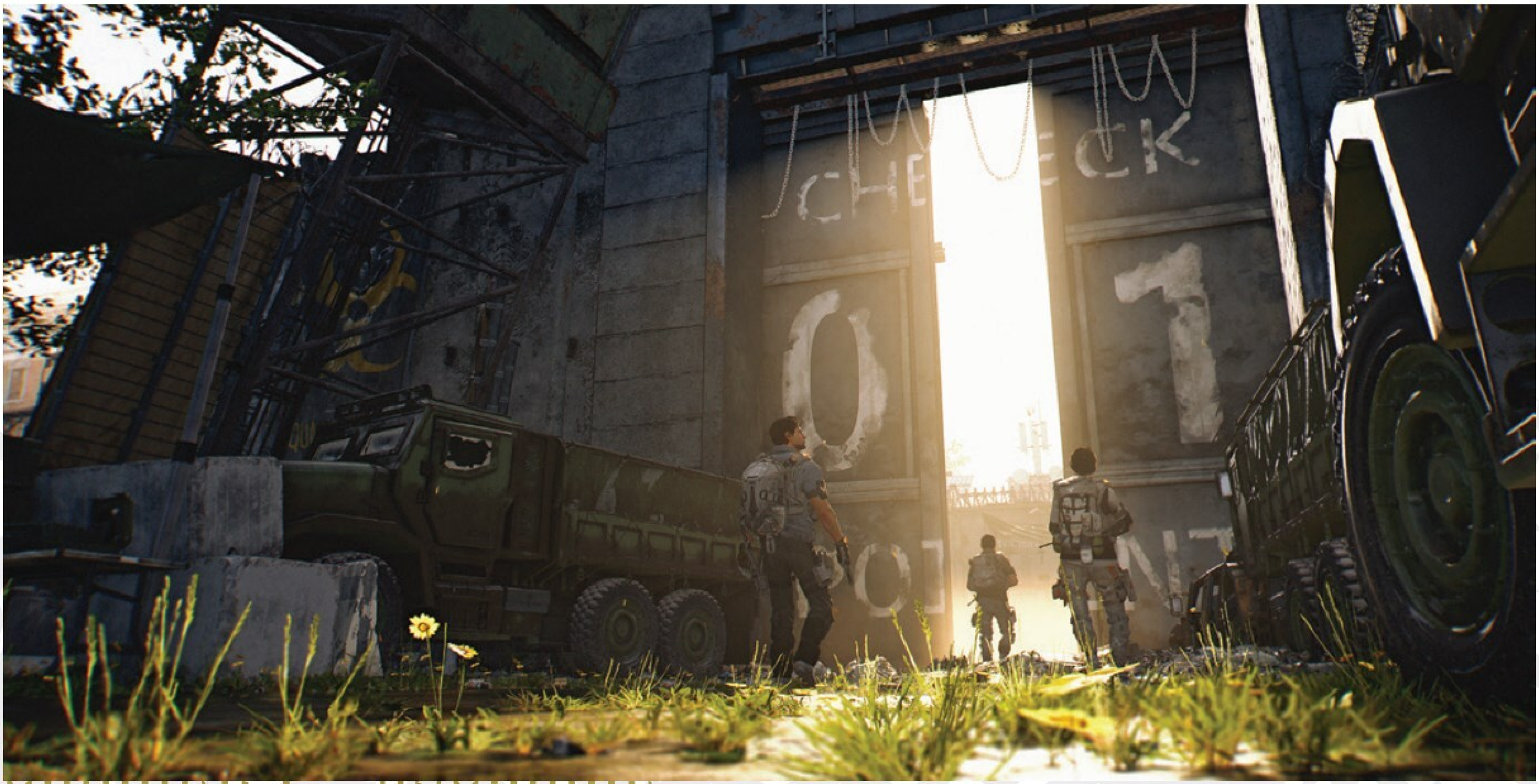
One of the biggest reasons many steered clear of the dark zone in the endgame was everyone knew the dedicated players patrolling its streets were most likely donning high-end gear much more effective than their own. In The Division 2, you no longer need to walk into a dark zone in fear of being destroyed by a Division lifer who has already min-maxed gear to the best of their ability. Ubisoft wants to make sure the three regions present an even playing field, which is why it has created a new weapon-normalization formula to balance out damage stats in the dark zone.

When you walk into the dark zone, your gear still works like you expect it to. However, all assault guns, sniper rifles, etc. are balanced to output similar damage. This rewards twitch play rather than whoever has spent more time with the game. The weapon normalization does not happen behind a veil of secrecy. In the menu system, you can view how your weapon stats change in the dark zone at the press of a button, allowing players to make visible adjustments.

Not everyone will be made happy by the decision to normalize weapon damage. After all, how are hardcore players going to peacock their amazing gear sets when their arsenal is re-rolled to the same basic level as an early-game weapon? Many at Red Storm recognize this plight, which is why once you reach endgame, there will always be one rotating "occupied" dark zone that burns the rules and lets anarchy reign. In this no-holds-barred experience, friendly fire is always on, normalization is thrown out the window, the enemies are tougher, and players can experiment with builds to their heart's content.

"We have to respect the players who still play today, who still go in the dark zone today, to really blow off steam and flex and reap the benefits of all the optimization they have done on other people's faces," says Red Storm creative director Terry Spier. "Give it to them, let them play as hard as they want to play. And take all the gloves off – everything. The A.I. is harder. The PvP is harder. That intensity appeals to me so much. I think it's going to be crazier than the dark zone was when we launched the original game."

No players have shade icons in these occupied zones, which means you have no idea what they are up to. Are they friendly? Are they manhunters? You never can tell until they act, adding yet another layer of tension to the experience.



CLASH OF CLANS

The oft-requested clan system finally becomes a reality in The Division 2. Setting up a clan with friends gives you a dedicated clan hall in your base of operations, plus a clan-focused progression system and leaderboards. Clans earn XP for completing objectives and activities together, which unlocks special collaborative objectives, clan perks, and exclusive clan cosmetic items.

"We want to make sure that people who participate in the clan feature can be as flamboyant as they want to really deck out their character and make sure they can be as proud as they want of their organization," says Red Storm creative director Terry Spier.

Clan members can communicate with each other via clan chat, direct messaging, and a bulletin-board system. The clan system lacks the ability to matchmake and scrimmage other clans, but Ubisoft's goal is to eventually have it integrated with all the features in the game.

The Hyenas are an anarchist faction of raiders who steal what they need and destroy what they don't

TURNING THE GUNS ON EACH OTHER

For those who crave a deeper adversarial experience than the dark zone where squads can test their mettle against rivals, The Division 2 has you covered with its new Conflict play space. This organized multiplayer option is accessible in the base of operations or via the menu system, putting bloodsport at the tip of your fingers no matter where you are on the map.

Don't expect Conflict to be a full-fledged multiplayer suite out of the gate. At launch, it allows two teams of four to square off against one another in two modes across three maps. As you would expect, Domination follows the familiar flag-capture formula found in many competitive shooters. Skirmish is essentially a team deathmatch mode that culminates in a single-elimination event.

Like the dark zone, the PvP battles use stat normalization to even the playing field. Skill-based matchmaking should group you with players with similar abilities, and the unique progression track in Conflict includes exclusive vanity awards you can't get elsewhere.

Ubisoft plans to add more maps and modes in the future, and they aren't closing the door on expanding the player count beyond eight.

At the end of the campaign, a deadly new faction known as the Black Tusks descends on D.C.

EXTENDING THE FIGHT

Ubisoft knows its ravenous hardcore fans will quickly burn through the 40-hour cooperative campaign and drive their dark zone levels through the roof in a matter of days, not months. It took a while for them to satiate the community's hunger for new content with The Division, slowly adding new features like bounties, world tiers, feats, and the PvP arena. This time, all this content is available from the start, and the teams developing The Division 2 have much more ambitious plans.

"Throughout the development of Division 2, we've always had an endgame-first philosophy," says Massive Entertainment creative director Julian Gerighty. "We've always had our eye on that moment you've completed the campaign, you've explored the map, the open world is completely open to you, and you have this incredible variety of activities that furnish almost a second campaign within endgame. We have a couple of tricks up our sleeves which give a narrative and gameplay focus and hook to drive people toward the endgame and be really competitive in all of those activities, whether they are hardcore activities or not."

The first trick is the arrival of a new faction at the end of the campaign: the Black Tusks. This highly organized domestic military force has more advanced tactics and movement patterns than the other factions, and uses robotics like the Boston Dynamics BigDog. Their invasion sends a tidal wave of changes throughout the game content. The living world bears the scars of the invasion, and co-op activities like bounties are much tougher. When you replay campaign missions, they even have new gameplay and narrative objectives.

The second trick is opening up new progression paths in endgame via specializations. Each of these is symbolized by a signature weapon – the Survivalist brandishes a crossbow, the Demolitionist a grenade launcher, and the Sharpshooter a .50 calibur sniper rifle. You aren't locked into an option once you choose it; you can hot swap these in and out and continue down their respective progression paths when they are equipped.

The endgame wouldn't add up to much without new content, and Ubisoft has some aggressive plans on this front. The game has the occupied dark zones, weekly invasions, stronghold battles, and roaming vendors to keep players busy, and the developers plan to add the first eight-player raid sometime shortly after launch.

After that, the first 12 months of post-game content is free to all players. Three major content drops planned around seasons will further evolve the experience, though Ubisoft was tight-lipped about what this will be. Underground-style procedurally generated levels? Nope, they don't have this planned for year one. What about the return of the amazing Survival mode from the first game? All they would say is "We absolutely adore Survival." ◆

Ubisoft has a 12-month post-launch plan of free expansion content for The Division 2

NEXT TO GODLINESS

» PLATFORM
Rift

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Oculus Studios

» DEVELOPER
Sanzaru Games

» RELEASE
2019

Virtual reality is about to step into full-featured gaming with Asgard's Wrath

BY IMRAN KHAN

"The Rift takes 3D gaming to the next level," the crowdfunding page for the Oculus virtual reality headset proclaimed in 2012. The lofty promises of VR gaming fueled the dreams of both gamers and developers as the video game industry sat on the precipice of the potential "next big thing." Nearly seven years and multiple consumer-level headsets later, VR has not taken over the gaming world, with developers still working out how to best use the technology.

The current slate of VR titles feels like a series of demos for the technology; the medium hasn't found a way to consistently deliver deep, meaningful experiences while still remaining comfortable. However, Oculus believes it has a potential breakthrough on its hands with Asgard's Wrath.

The newest game by Sly Cooper 4 developers Sanzaru Games, Asgard's Wrath brings the console-style gaming experience to virtual reality in a way few others have tried. The first-person Norse mythology action-adventure game makes no compromises for being in virtual reality, hoping to not only measure up to years of established traditional games, but maybe even exceed them using the extra options VR has to offer.

THE POWER OF A GOD

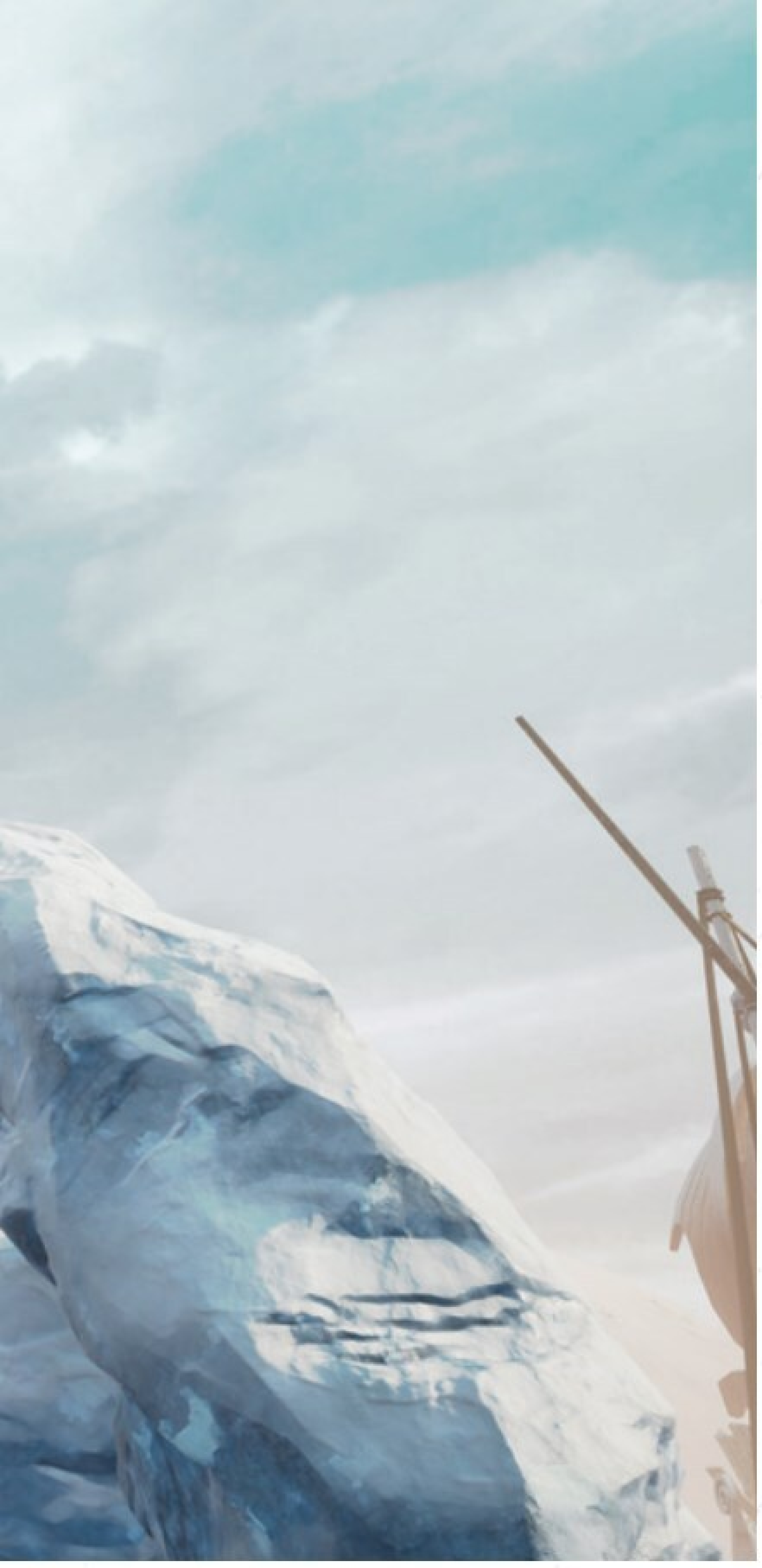
Building off Norse mythology for all its characters and settings without strictly adhering to them, Asgard's Wrath puts the player in the middle of the power fantasy of being a god, albeit a minor one. At the beginning of the game, you witness trickster Loki in trouble and aid him, which prompts the infamous mischief-maker to take you under his wing as his disciple. Those familiar with Loki know he is not the most trustworthy god, but he promises to make you stronger, and strength is a predominant currency in Asgard.

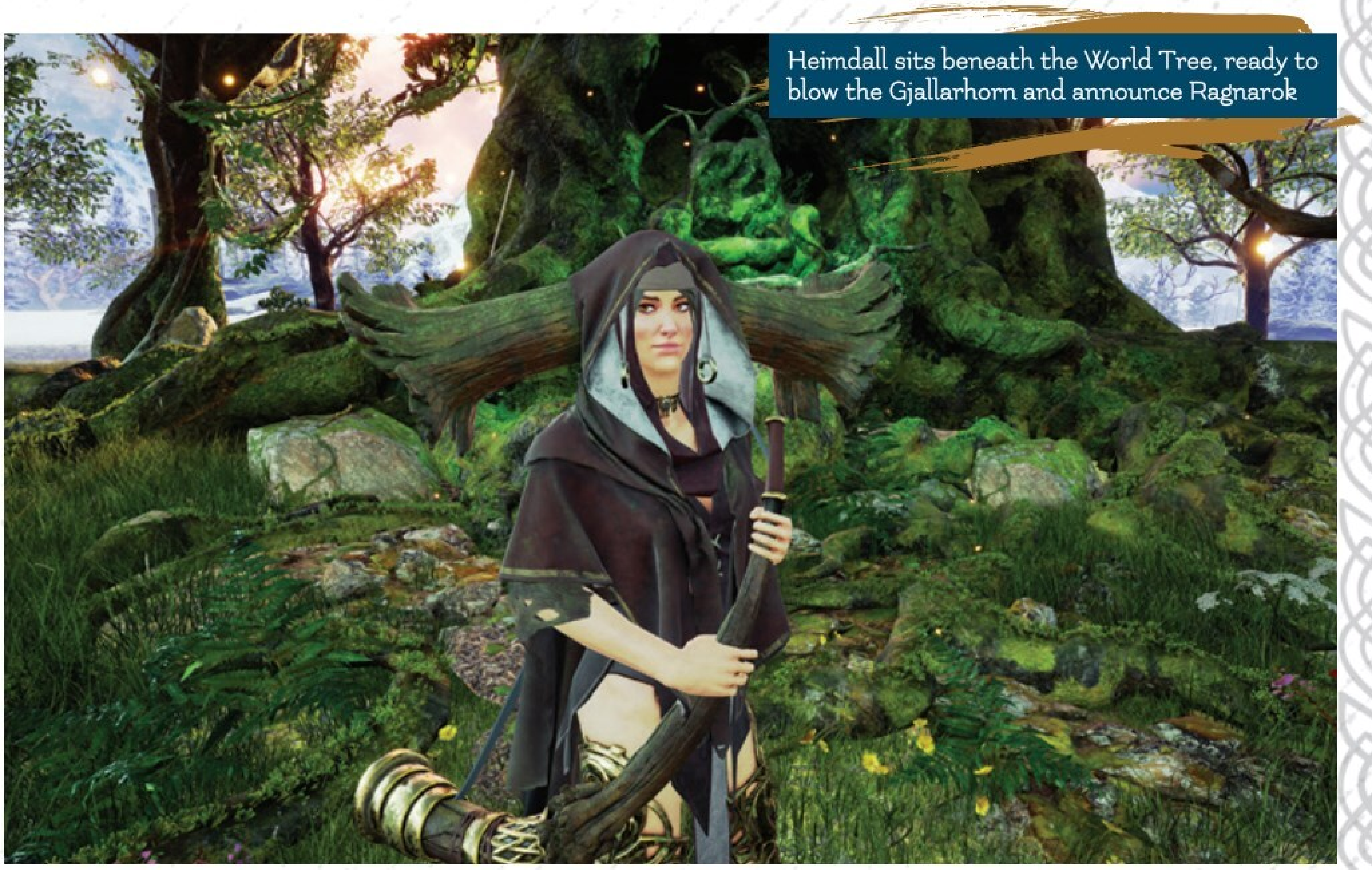
When talking to Sanzaru's creative director Matt Kraemer, I was told, "You can't really look at this game and understand what it is without playing it." After seeing the game in action, I get what he is saying – it's difficult to explain how the game's mechanics work by just watching a video. Asgard's Wrath uses virtual reality to emphasize the scalability of the world around you. As a god, you tower over the areas you're in, which are like playsets to be poked, prodded, and manipulated. When possessing a human, which you do with some regularity, the action takes place on the ground-level. When controlling a human, movement is direct, not teleportation-focused, via the analog stick. Proper dungeon traversal and puzzle-solving involves switching between these two modes as one entity.

Loki sends the player out on quests to aid humanity in their trials and tribulations, winning their trust and ultimately reaping the rewards of your journey. As a god, you can possess a human, help them on their quest by solving puzzles and fighting enemies, and receive the crystalized essence of your journey at the end of it. Loki collects these crystals but doesn't explain why he needs them, though it seems to involve the other gods of the different realms in some way or another.

One of these assistance-seekers is a blind man by the name of Frodi, a Gothi priest who discovers that an undead army from Helheim is making its way into Asgard. Standing beneath the World Tree, Asgardian gatekeeper Heimdall asks your aid in helping Frodi stop the invasion. Possessing the Gothi gifts him his eyesight back and allows you to use his staff, a weapon that shoots powerful magic you can guide with your hands.

To stem the invading horde of Hel soldiers, the player must guide Frodi through a valley with catacombs built into its internal stone. An altar to the gods stands in the center, allowing you to switch between the god form towering over the canyon and the Gothi scuttling about within its walls. In your giant form, you manipulate large objects to get a general view that Frodi can't hope to see from his diminutive position. You are also able to witness a bull-drawn wagon overturning on the field above, allowing you to reach for one of the loose bulls and convert him





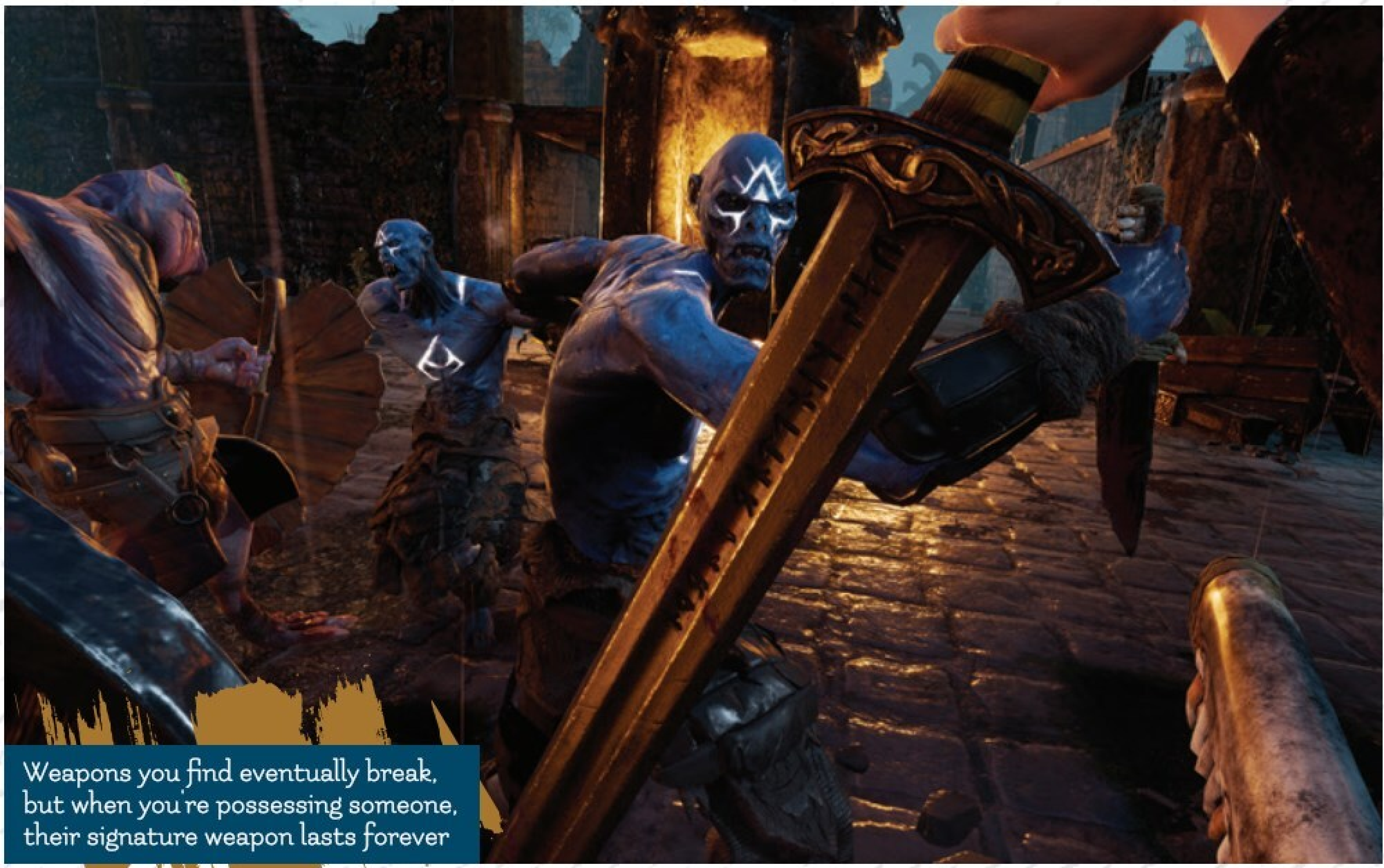
Heimdall sits beneath the World Tree, ready to blow the Gjallarhorn and announce Ragnarok

into an animal partner.

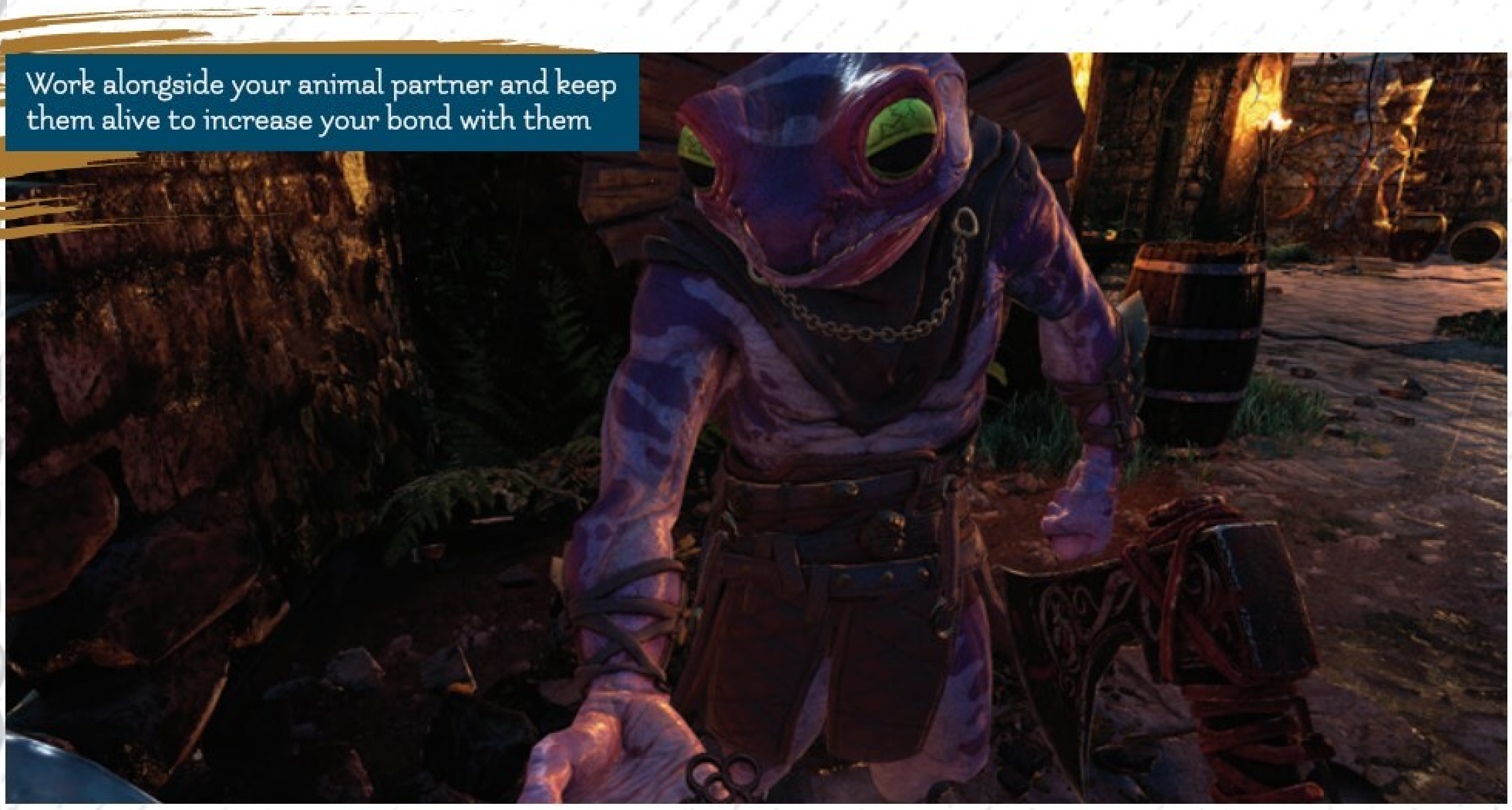
The converted animals each have their own skillsets, personalities, and powers. Converting the bull creates a partner named Steinar, a no-nonsense bruiser that runs headfirst into walls and often moves them. Different animals create different humanoid partners, like the bipedal frog Stiggi, who uses his long tongue to grab otherwise inaccessible items. There's also Rolf the wolf, who howls at the right frequency to shatter crystals hiding secret treasures.

Once an animal has been converted into an anthropomorphized partner, they can be summoned at your beck and call later, and brought into old sections of the game to unlock previously inaccessible areas. You can even build a relationship with them over the course of the game by shaking their hands, giving high-fives, and dapping when they offer their fist. Similarly, slapping them around or letting them repeatedly fall in battle lowers their relationship with you.

Within the tombs, undead warriors called draugs defend their resting places in a most unrestful way. Steinar is more than happy to plow through the revived skeletons, but the blind Gothi is not exactly a gladiator – even with a god possessing him. Stealing some weapons from the nearby graves is a far better option than relying on the magic staff. Once I do, I realize where Asgard's Wrath really shines: the surprisingly deep combat.



Weapons you find eventually break, but when you're possessing someone, their signature weapon lasts forever


Work alongside your animal partner and keep them alive to increase your bond with them

FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

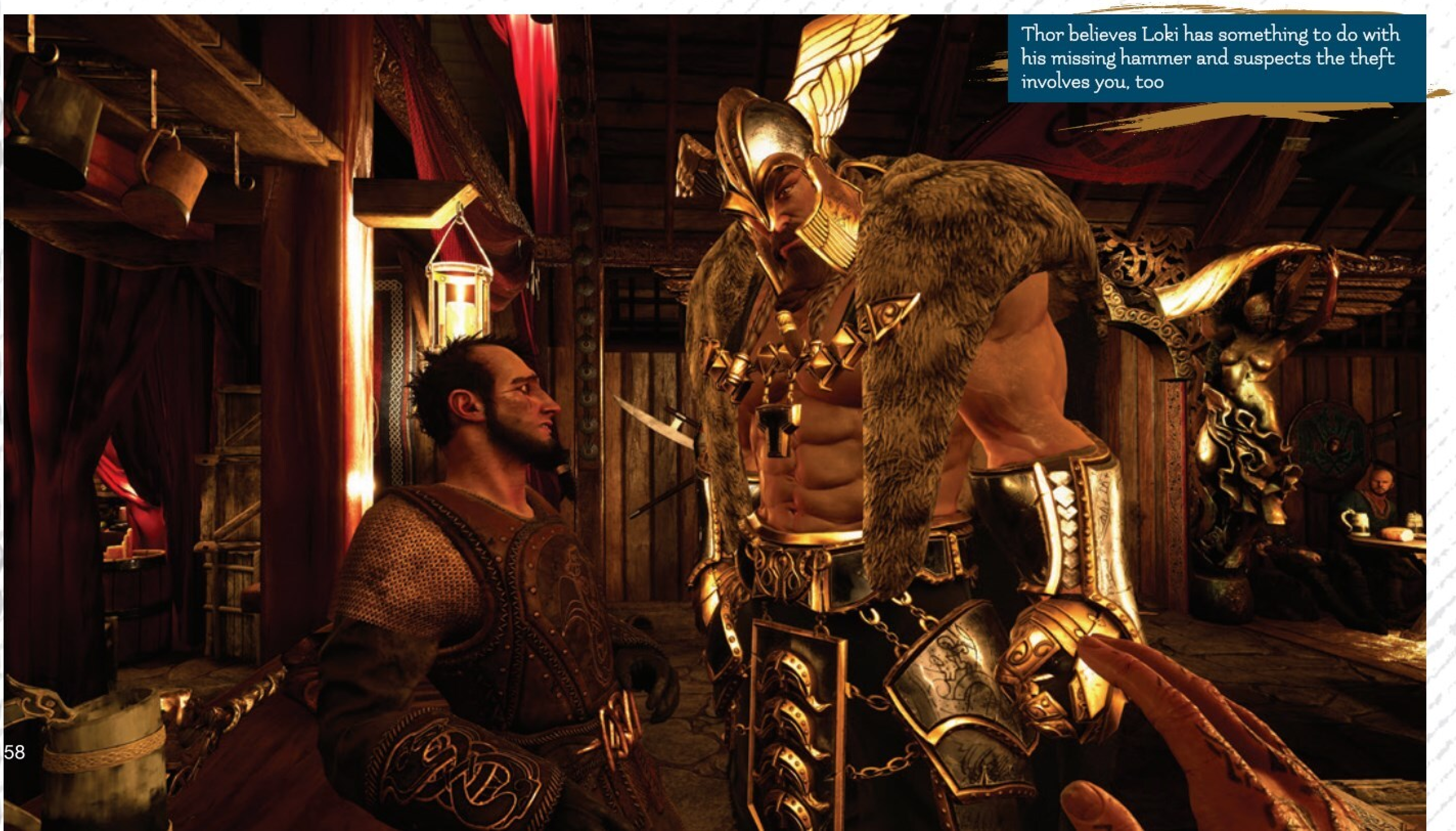
Combat in VR feels like it should be a no-brainer, where your attacks emulate hand movements, but I haven't seen a game that so thoughtfully considers how you get there until now. You have four slots to equip weapons and items on your back, meaning that a sword equipped on your left shoulder requires you to reach over and pluck it from its sheath with your right hand. While initially I found myself awkwardly and blindly groping for my sword and shield that I placed in slots for the wrong hands, before long I was tossing my weapons in the air to exchange hands and behead monsters in simple, quick movements that feel ripped from fantasy novels.

Pretty much every idea you have for a weapon can be performed within Asgard's Wrath. Using a sword to block or parry an enemy's attack can be done on reaction by bringing your weapon to theirs. A shield can be thrust at an incoming opponent to stagger them, allowing you to come in at their neck with your weapon. You can even just pick up items and weapons around the room and run around throwing them at pursuing enemies to slowly chip away at them. After taking off a Hel soldier's head and accidentally catching it in the air, I threw it at another armored undead and knocked his helmet off in the process.

As a priest who has spent his life dedicated to their service, Frodi is happy to accept help from the gods – but not everyone is so willing. Different sagas have different characters whose forms and weapons you can take after solving their problems, whether they want you to or not. The warrior Ingrid has sworn a blood vendetta against the gods and is not eager to accept one's help even to complete this goal. Stikkan, a dark elf who specializes in smuggling, has no such qualms about any means that he can profit from.

Each character comes equipped with their own signature weapon, which can vary greatly between the different roles. Frodi has his magic staff, which can be used to both shoot magic at enemies and simply whack them in the side of the head with tremendous force. Stikkan wields a double-ended blade that can split apart and be used to entrap enemies using the magic energy that holds them together, a fitting weapon for an assassin. Ingrid the Shieldmaiden wields an enchanted axe that can be thrown and summoned back using a gesture with your hands – not unlike a certain other god cutting his way through the Norse pantheon. But the added visceral feel to recalling and catching it with your actual hands makes it feel even more fun.

Ingrid's saga finds her in the dungeon with a goblin brood mother, who the Shieldmaiden unceremoniously awakens with an axe to the abdomen. The ensuing boss fight involves the player kiting the meaty monster around the arena while you throw your axe at exploding pots in her vicinity. Equipping potions lets you pull them out as you need them, allowing you to throw the axe, then pull out a potion and drink it while the axe returns, flying right through an enemy's head on its way back. It is around then that I realized the deceptive simplicity of VR combat, in that everything works the way you think it should, but provides a number of options to play the way you want.


Thor believes Loki has something to do with his missing hammer and suspects the theft involves you, too

Loki tasks you with errands across the nine realms, but nothing says you cannot stop and smell the roses

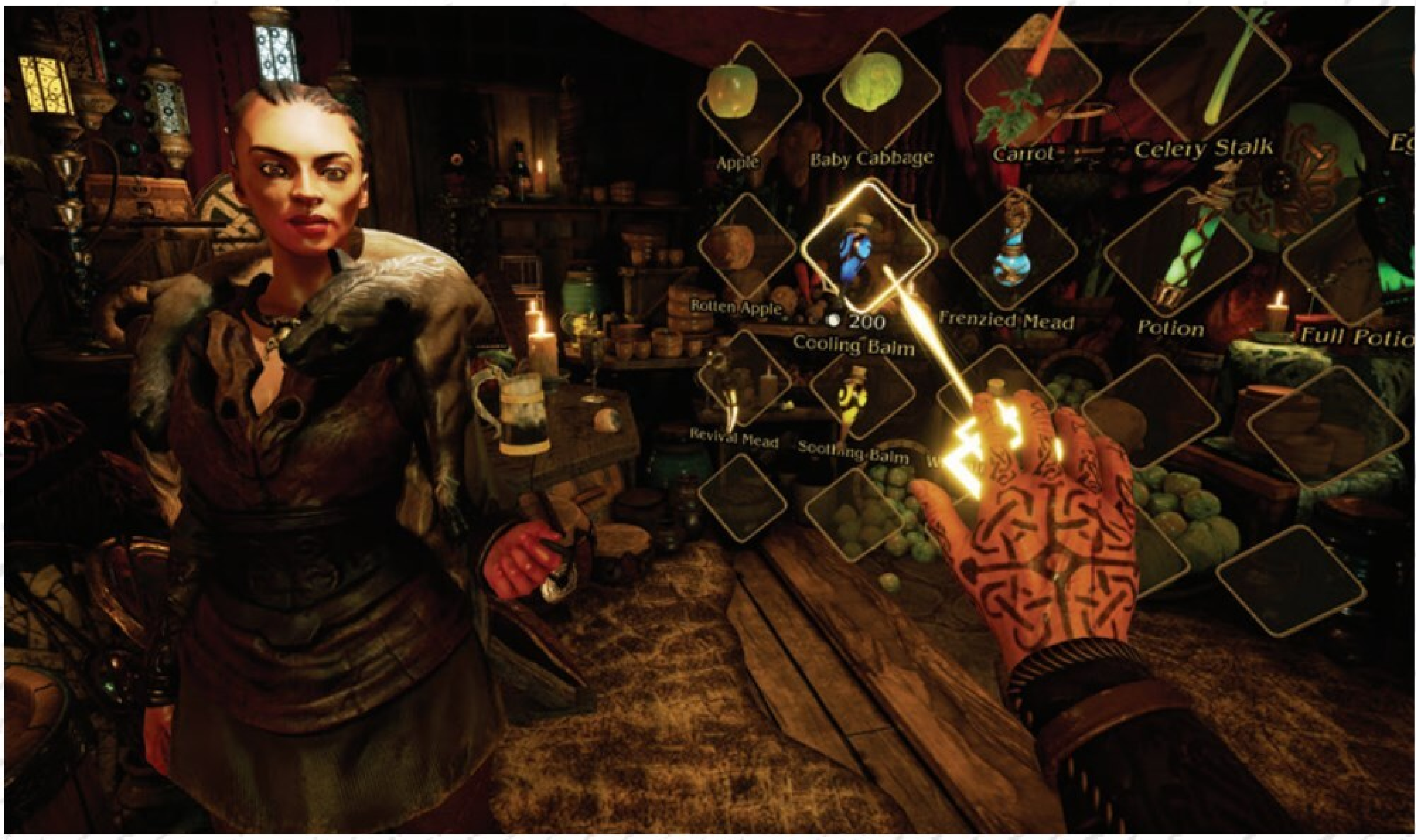
AN EXTENSIVE VR EXPERIENCE

While Oculus has a wireless headset called the Oculus Quest coming soon, Asgard's Wrath is currently releasing exclusively for the Rift. The physicality of the game means that you will be up and about at most junctions, so you will be tethered to the PC during the gameplay. Perhaps in the future games like this can be played on fully wireless headsets, but for now the higher-end virtual reality gaming experience still involves cords.

Sanzaru's Mat Kraemer and Grace Morales Lingad say there's around 40 hours of content in Asgard's Wrath, replete with different sagas of characters, animal buddies, sidequests, and abilities to unlock new secrets in previously visited areas. This isn't a demo for virtual reality, it's a full-blooded Norse action-adventure.

Developers spent the last seven years trying to crack the nut of game development in VR to varying degrees of success. Kraemer and Lingad described this as a collaborative effort, figuring out how to make things like locomotion in VR work without making players sick, discussing how best to make extras in a cutscene react, and generally working together to figure out how to navigate this still uncharted ground. It is exciting to think that Asgard's Wrath is just the beginning of where VR gaming is going and what it might be in the future.

Whether due to the market or the technology, developers have not yet succeeded at making the epic 40-hour RPG that Asgard's Wrath hopes to be. The age of the gods might be coming to an end in this new virtual reality adventure, but the twilight of the Norse pantheon looks to be the first big step for VR gaming. ◆

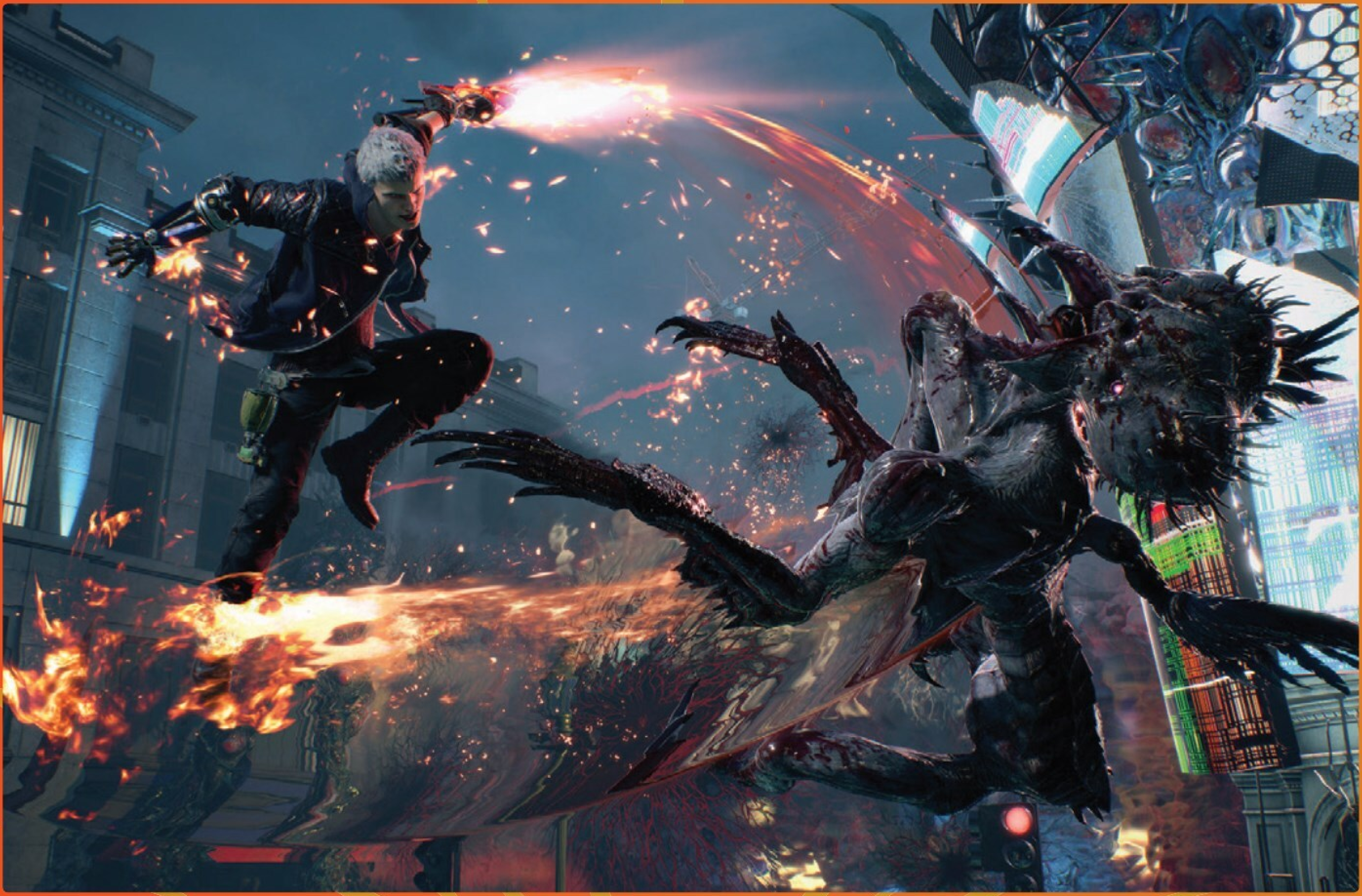


THE MOST EXCITING GAMES OF 2019

HYPE

by KYLE HILLIARD

The past two years were strong ones for video games, featuring phenomenal titles like Breath of the Wild, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, God of War, and Red Dead Redemption II. In that context, 2019 has some huge shoes to fill. Looking toward the future, however, several games could be up to the task. Even without expected heavy hitters like Cyberpunk 2077, The Last of Us Part II, and Pokémon on Switch – three highly anticipated games we're not sure are coming this year (though we have our fingers crossed) – the field still looks promising. Read on to learn about the 25 games we're most excited to play this year and hope don't get pushed into 2020 (we have our fingers crossed for that, too).



Devil May Cry 5

March 8 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The last Devil May Cry game (developed by Ninja Theory) was a fun reimagining, but with Devil May Cry 5, Capcom is taking the series back to the familiar cast and combat that originally made this stylish action series a hit. Beyond its time-tested foundation, this installment gives you even more options to fight with flair. The three playable characters have different approaches to combat; Nero uses a robotic arm, Dante has style-switching, and the mysterious V summons magical beasts to do his dirty work. Whether you're taking down standard demons or gigantic bosses, the stunning visuals and fluid controls are poised to make every slash satisfying.

The Division 2

March 15 PS4, Xbox One, PC

Building off the success of the first game, The Division 2 takes the fight to Washington D.C. With the capital on the verge of collapse, agents in this shared-world shooter must work together to pick up the pieces and preserve order. Ubisoft seems to be smartly building on the success of the first with a new cooperative campaign featuring more varied environments, a reworked Dark Zone experience, several gameplay systems that carry over into the endgame, and loot galore. Read more about the changes coming to this promising shooter on page 48.

One Piece: World Seeker

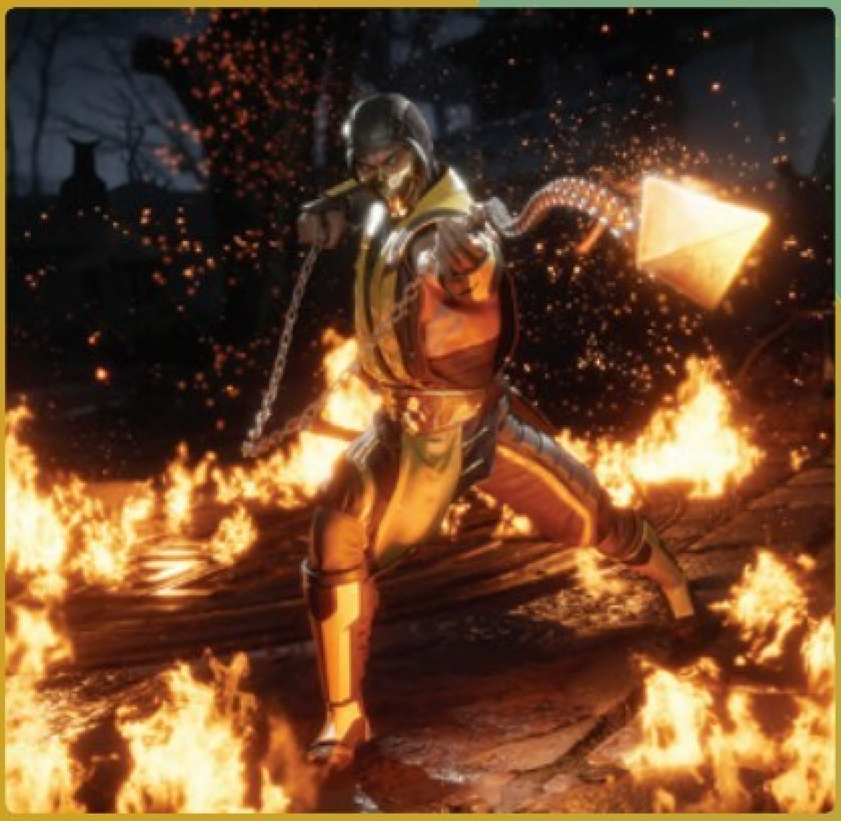
March 15 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The One Piece franchise has always struggled to find mainstream success in North America despite being the best-selling manga of all time. Optimistically, World Seeker could be the game that finally makes a larger audience take notice. Our hands-on time reminded us of Metal Gear Solid V, of all things, and traversing through its open world has a superhero quality reminiscent of Insomniac's Spider-Man or Rocksteady's Batman. All of the games we just compared One Piece to admittedly set a high bar, but we're hopeful this is finally the game that lives up to One Piece's inviting world and flashy action.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

March 22 PS4, Xbox One, PC

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice is the latest from From Software, the developer behind Dark Souls and Bloodborne. While this ninja adventure comfortably stands alongside those games, it also carves its own identity. You don't choose a class in Sekiro. Instead you play as the singular skilled shinobi who relies on stealth, a grappling hook, his trusty katana, and an interchangeable arm offering different abilities. The game takes place in the late 16th century Sengoku period of Japan, but it's an alternate version of the past with plenty of From Software's mythical monsters and larger-than-life bosses. Fans of From's previous games will have to master some new mechanics for Sekiro, but we're eager to learn.



Mortal Kombat 11

April 23 PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Revealed with a surprise trailer during the 2018 Video Game Awards, Mortal Kombat looks to continue the franchise's violent reputation, while paying lots of homage to the Mortal Kombats that came before it. Multiple versions of fighters from disparate generations will be playable, and we've also met one of the game's new original characters. Geras can control sand to create defensive walls and offensive spikes and can even use it to teleport on the battlefield. For a whole lot more, you can read our hands-on impressions with details from Mortal Kombat's creator, Ed Boon, on page 72.

Days Gone

April 26 PS4

Sony's oft-delayed post-apocalyptic game finally has a release date locked down and we're excited to jump on a bike and experience the zombie-infested open roads. You play as Deacon St. John, a patched member of the Mongrels MC doing his best to survive the ravaged forests of Oregon, which inevitably leads to conflict with infected and uninfected humans alike. What sets this open world game apart from the others is Deacon's reliance on his bike. Maintaining its health is just as important as taking care of your own – it's your best bet to escape those massive hordes of Freakers.

Rage 2

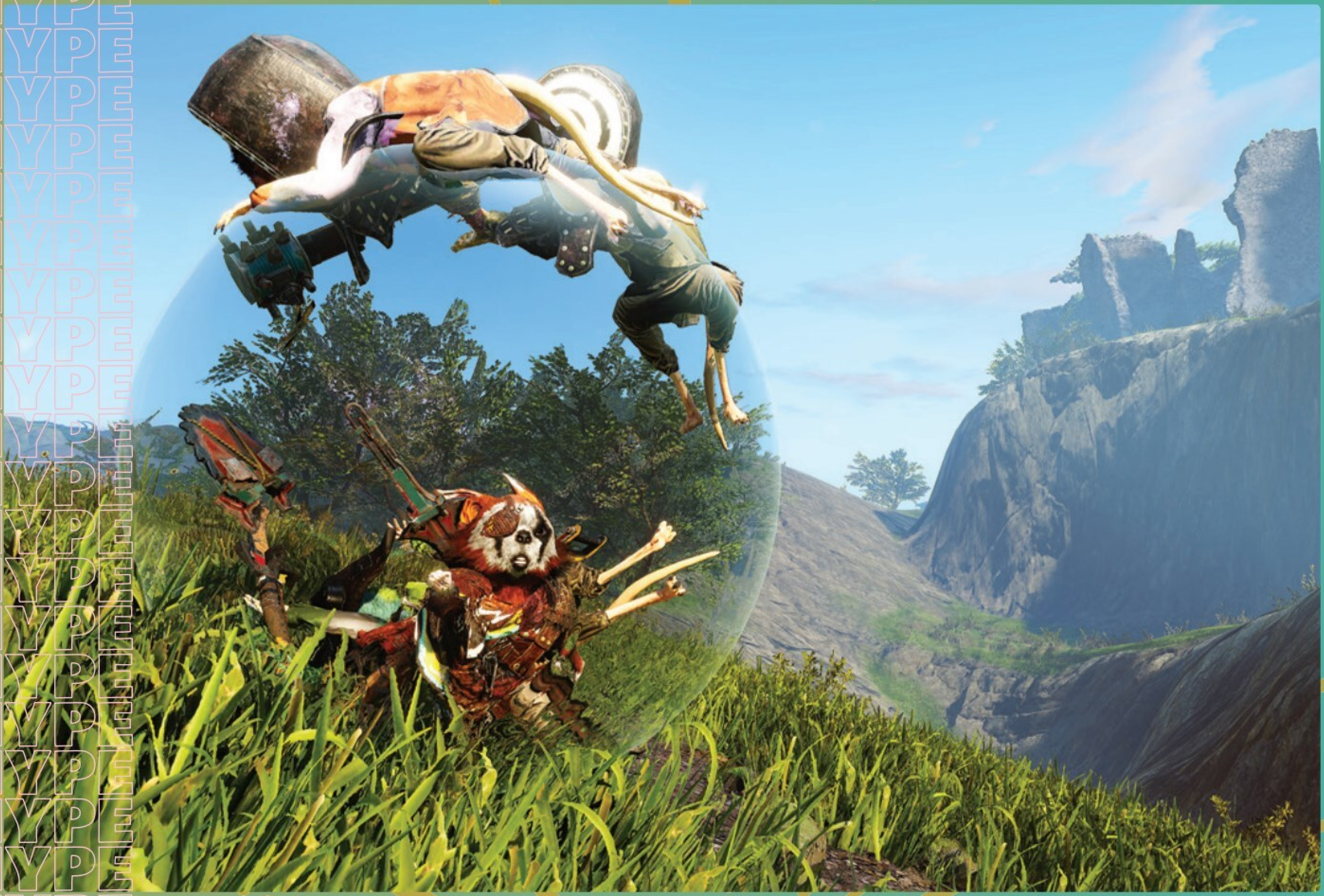
May 14 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The original Rage was a solid first-person shooter that didn't necessarily demand a sequel, but each look at the new game makes us more excited. Developed in partnership with the creators of Just Cause, Rage 2 marries apocalyptic open-world exploration with id's signature high-speed gunplay. The firefights get even more interesting thanks to special abilities that can be combined in explosive ways. Since the world is starting to recover from the apocalypse, we look forward to exploring more diverse biomes and fighting the varied factions gunning for supremacy.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Spring Switch

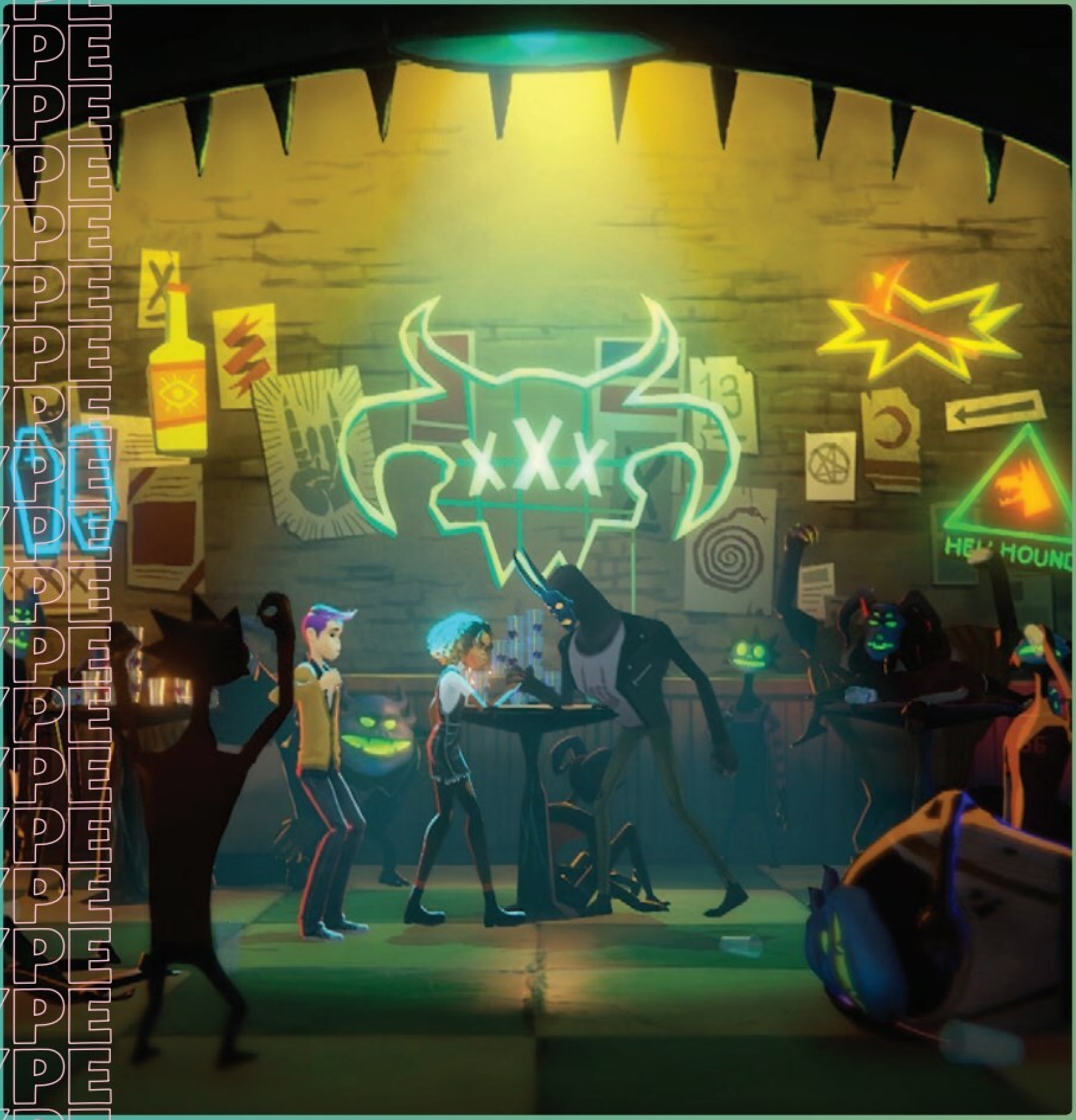
From its humble beginnings as a franchise Nintendo assumed North America would not be interested in, Fire Emblem has become one of its major core franchises. Its release on Switch marks the series' first console release in over a decade. Along with looking sharper than the handheld Fire Emblems, Three Houses lets players explore a castle and changes up the combat mechanics in a way that seems to give the medieval war a larger scale. You are still making familiar Fire Emblem tactical moves on a grid, but when the action zooms in, it actually looks like a full-scale war with swaths of soldiers following powerful heroes into battle.



Biomutant

Summer PS4, Xbox One, PC

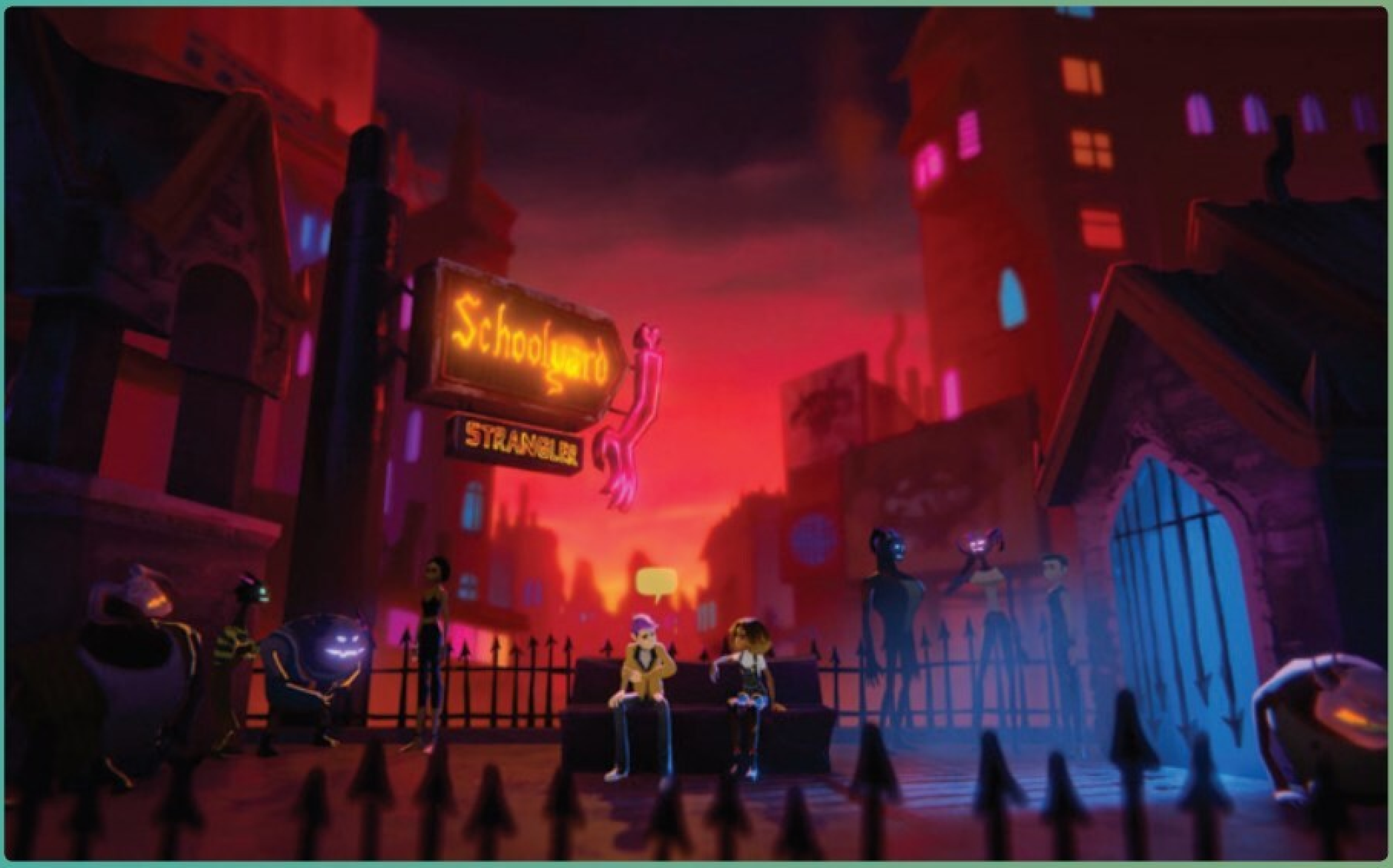
Biomutant is an anomaly this console generation. The open-world action RPG has a distinct style and is very ambitious, especially when you consider this is basically developer Experiment 101's first game. You play as a customizable, racoon-like creature that can augment itself with cyborg-like appendages and abilities. You tweak your DNA to do things like make your fur thicker to become stronger but heavier, unlock strange abilities like a giant snot bubble that acts as a shield, or barf out a collection of vicious moths to help you fight. There really isn't much like Biomutant, and for that reason, we're looking forward to its release.



Afterparty

2019 PC, Mac

Night School Studio's Oxenfree follow-up has an attractive neon art style and a bizarre, but enticing premise. Lifelong friends Milo and Lola die and end up in hell after some kind of incident that may or may not be Milo's fault. The two decide the best way to get out of hell is to challenge Satan to a drinking contest. What we've seen of the game shows a surprisingly colorful and bustling version of hell with both demons and humans walking the street while Milo and Lola try to navigate this world and develop their plan. The dark sense of humor, attractive visuals, and strength of Oxenfree make this one we're keeping an eye on.



Animal Crossing

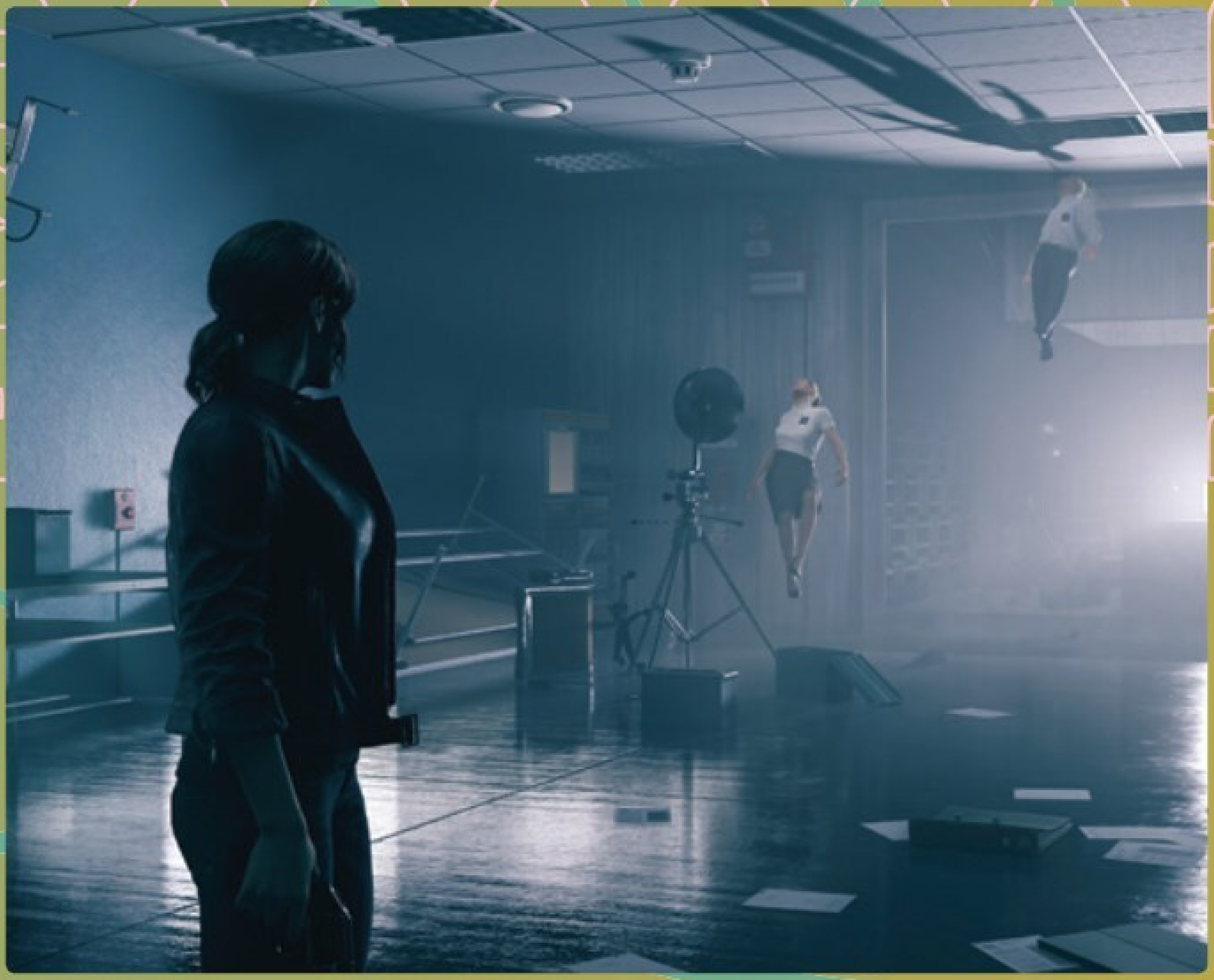
2019 Switch

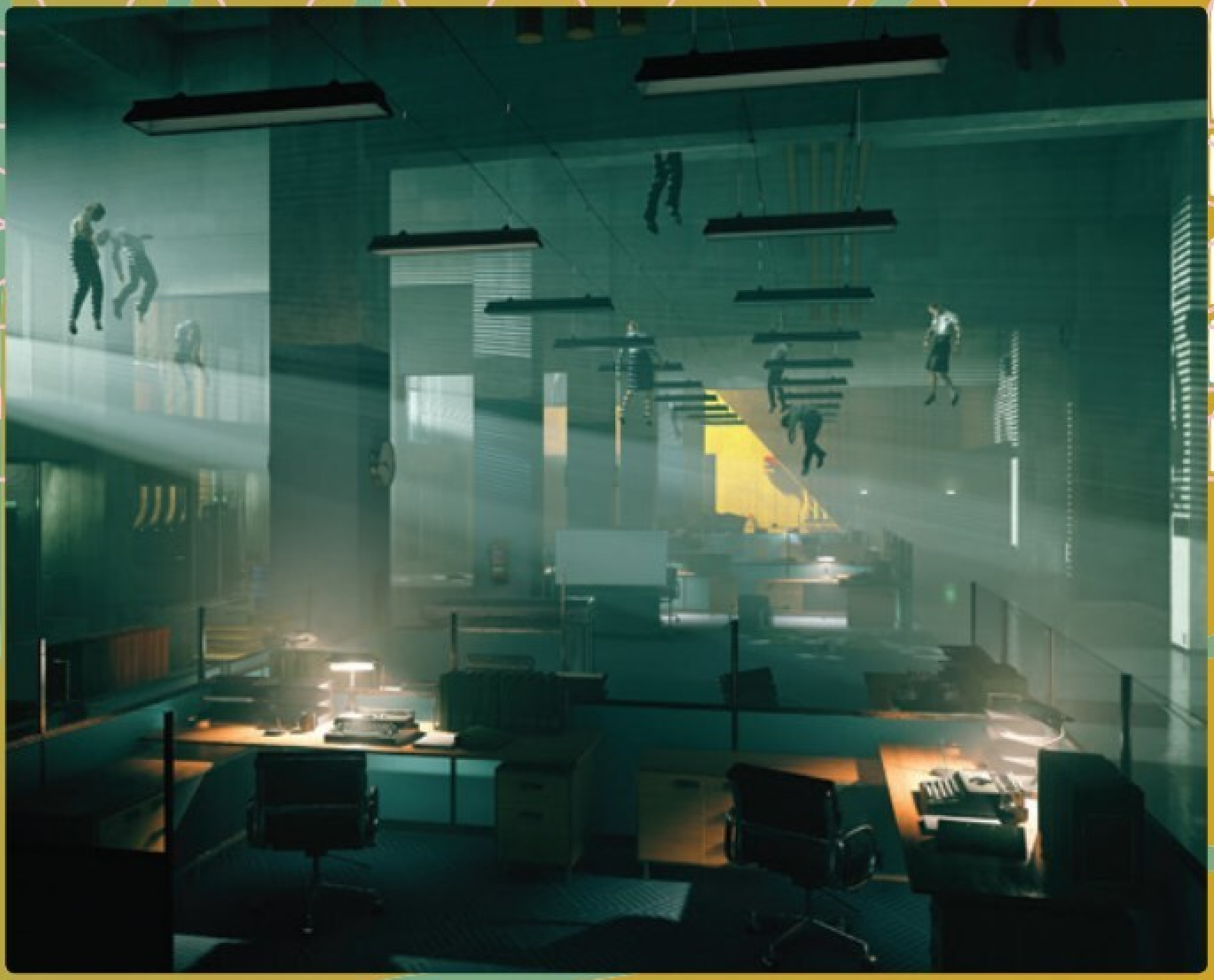
We don't know a lot about the next Animal Crossing. We don't know its true title, we don't know if its gameplay functions the same as previous Animal Crossings, and we don't know if it features a story conceit like 2013's New Leaf, which assigned the player the job of mayor upon arrival in the new town. Even the teaser trailer announcing its existence contained a disclaimer saying the visuals were not necessarily representative of the game. One of the few things we do know about it however, is that it is planned for release in 2019, pending any delays, and we can't wait to start over in a new town.

The Dark Pictures Anthology: Man of Medan

2019 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The Dark Pictures is the new, ambitious storytelling anthology from the creators of Until Dawn. Man of Medan is the first episode of an unspecified number of episodes. It follows a group of deep sea divers as they contend with things that go bump in the night on a ghost ship. The experience hews closer to Until Dawn than the developer's other VR and PlayLink experiences, and we're excited to see the team return its focus to horror and storytelling.

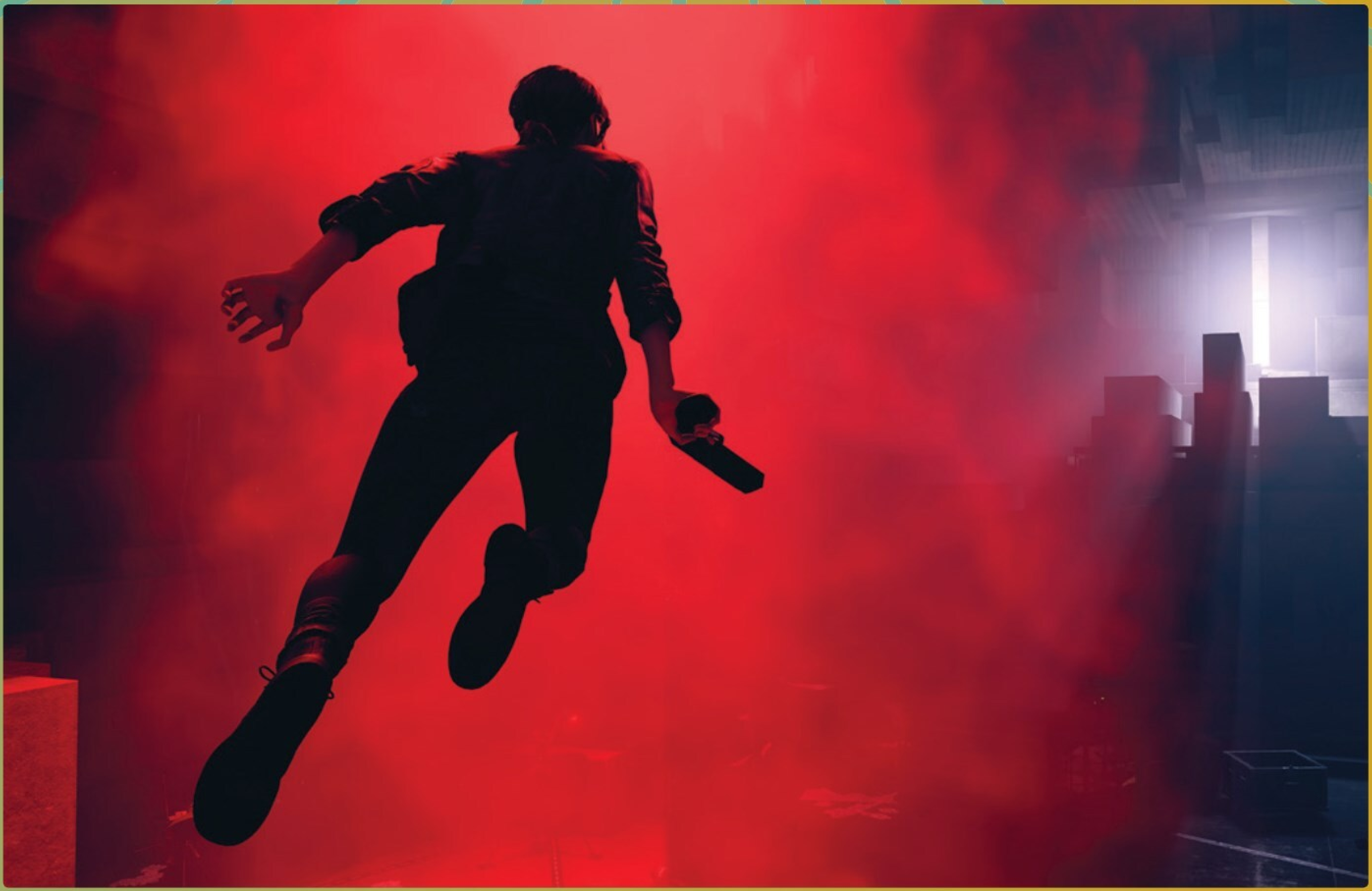




Control

2019 PS4, Xbox One, PC

With games like Max Payne and Quantum Break, developer Remedy Entertainment has proven it excels at telling stories within the framework of third-person shooters. Control fits in that mold, but it looks like it may be Remedy's weirdest, most mind-bending game yet. Taking place in the Oldest House, the home of a government agency that explores supernatural phenomena, we've seen protagonist Jesse moving things with her mind, floating through the air, and pulling nearby furniture and other oddities toward her to create a shield while exploring the facility. Remedy has teased that Control is less linear than its previous games, with new areas and paths opening in the Oldest House as you unlock abilities, giving the experience a Metroid quality.



Dying Light 2

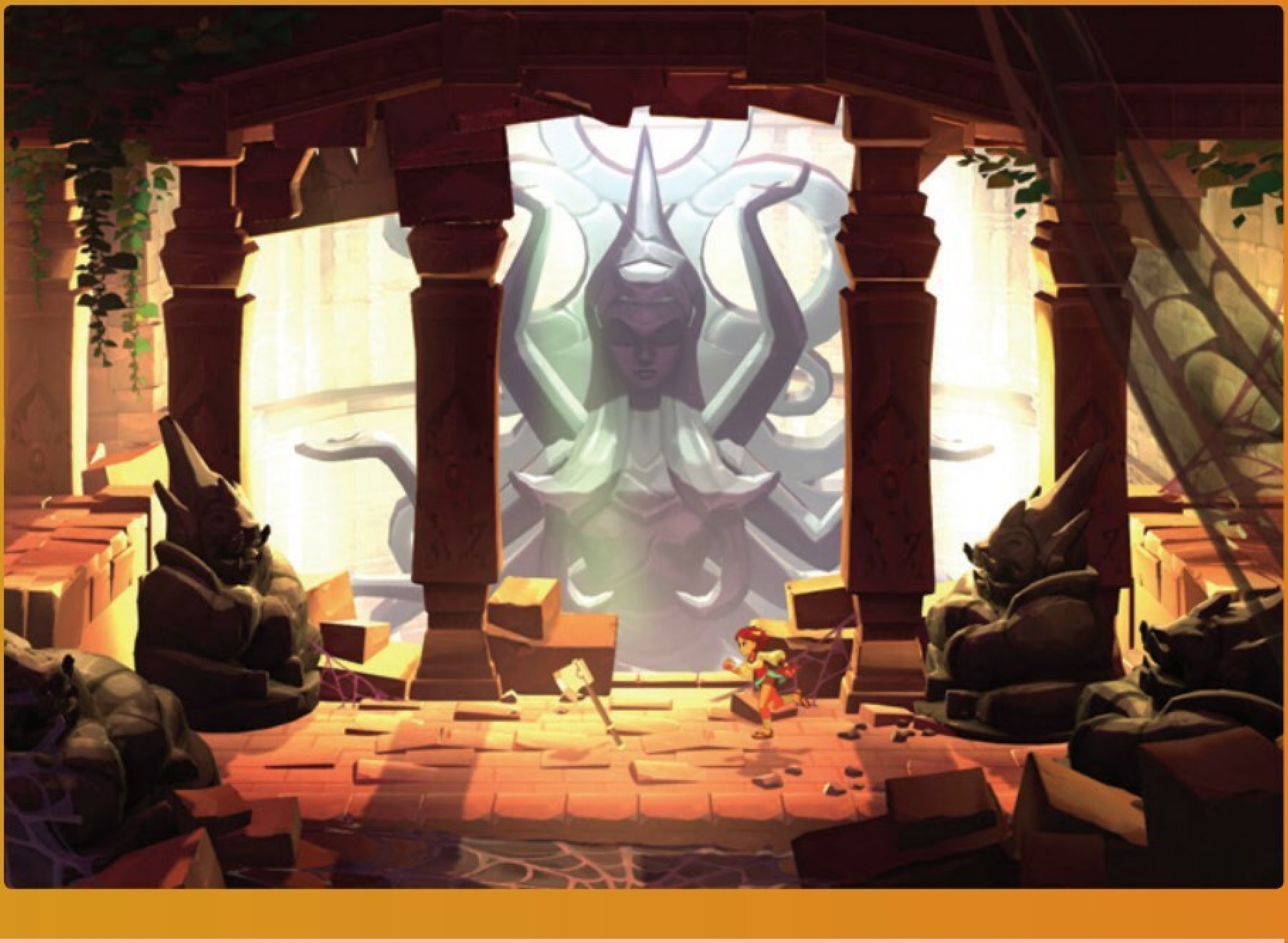
2019 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The quick pitch for Dying Light 2 isn't too different from the original game: you are a skilled parkour acrobat doing your best to survive in a zombie-infested open world. The thing that makes the sequel especially exciting is the participation of narrative designer Chris Avellone, who promises the game's story offers impactful decisions that dramatically affect the story and world. Avellone's professional history includes games like the Baldur's Gate series and Fallout: New Vegas, which makes us optimistic about Dying Light 2's narrative potential.

Indivisible

2019 PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Developer Lab Zero Games made a name for itself with Skullgirls, a fighting game with fantastic 2D art and animation. The developer is switching genres for its follow-up, but is maintaining its impressive art and animation. Inspired by Valkyrie Profile, the game is played on a 2D plane with platforming navigation and high-speed turn-based combat that rewards quick reaction and smart combos. The game has been in development for a long time, but we're excited to finally play it this year, fingers crossed.



Judgment

2019 PS4

Yakuza used to be a niche series in North America despite its huge success in Japan, but in recent years, we finally began to embrace it and effectively kick ourselves for not being fans sooner. Judgment (called Judge Eyes in Japan) is a spin-off of the Yakuza series that follows an attorney-turned-investigator named Takayuki Yagami as he tries to solve a serial murder case. The game employs gameplay mechanics that should be familiar to Yakuza players, like its combat, while also adding new investigation gameplay. It sounds a little like the Yakuza team's take on Phoenix Wright, which could be a great combo.

Luigi's Mansion 3

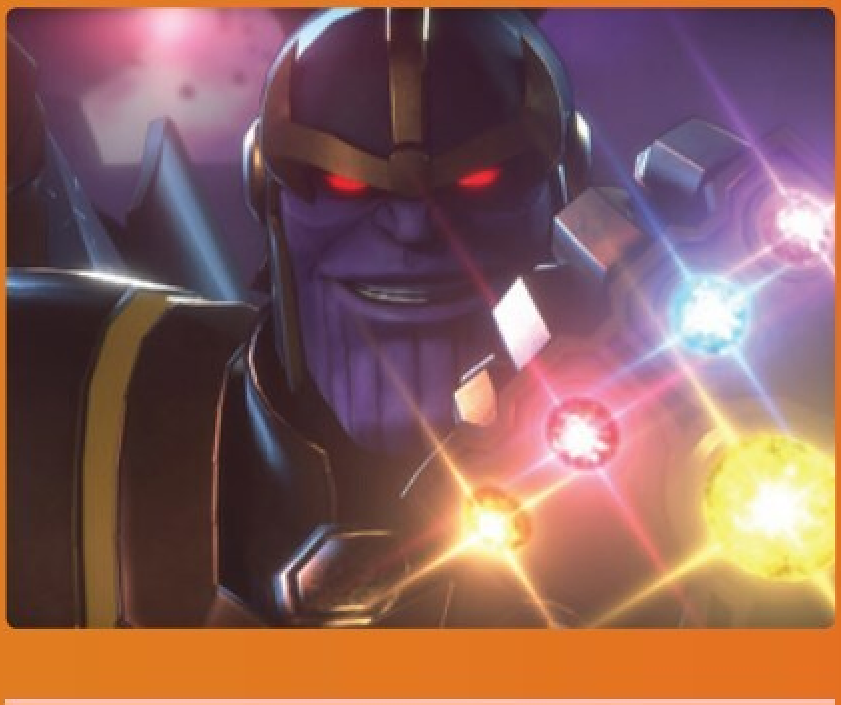
2019 Switch

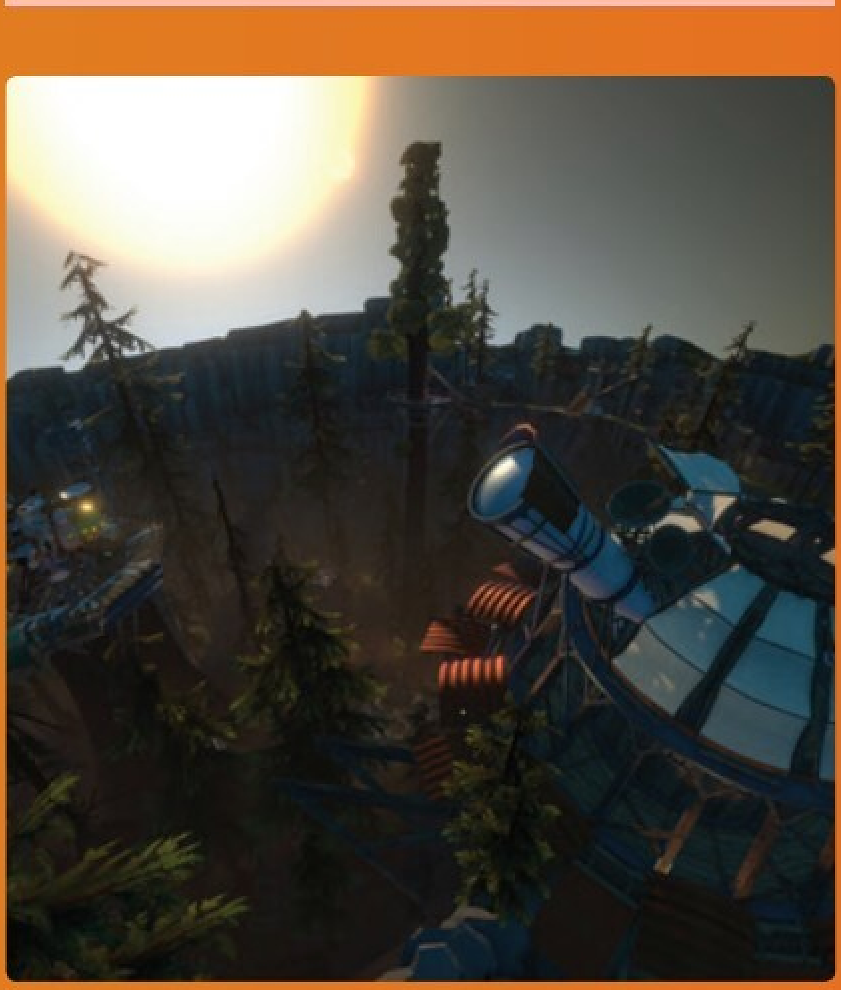
After Nintendo's Year of Luigi in 2013, we assumed the downtrodden brother had officially squandered all of his chances to be the protagonist of his own game. This is why the announcement of Luigi's Mansion 3 was such a surprise. In this sequel, Luigi gets new ghost-vacuuming tools and improved visuals. Small teases hint at multiple mansions and perhaps a mission to save a vacationing Mario. We're excited Luigi is getting another chance to prove his worth.

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order

2019 Switch

Surprisingly, Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 is a Switch exclusive being developed by Team Ninja, the Japanese studio behind the Dead or Alive and Ninja Gaiden series. Unsurprisingly, it is still a hack-and-slash RPG, like the previous games, and it offers local and online co-op for up to four players. The game's story hews closely to the comics that introduced the titular Black Order (Thanos' devoted army of super-powered commanders) and tasks the X-Men with teaming up with other Marvel heroes like Spider-Man and Iron Man to prevent them from acquiring Earth's Infinity Stones.

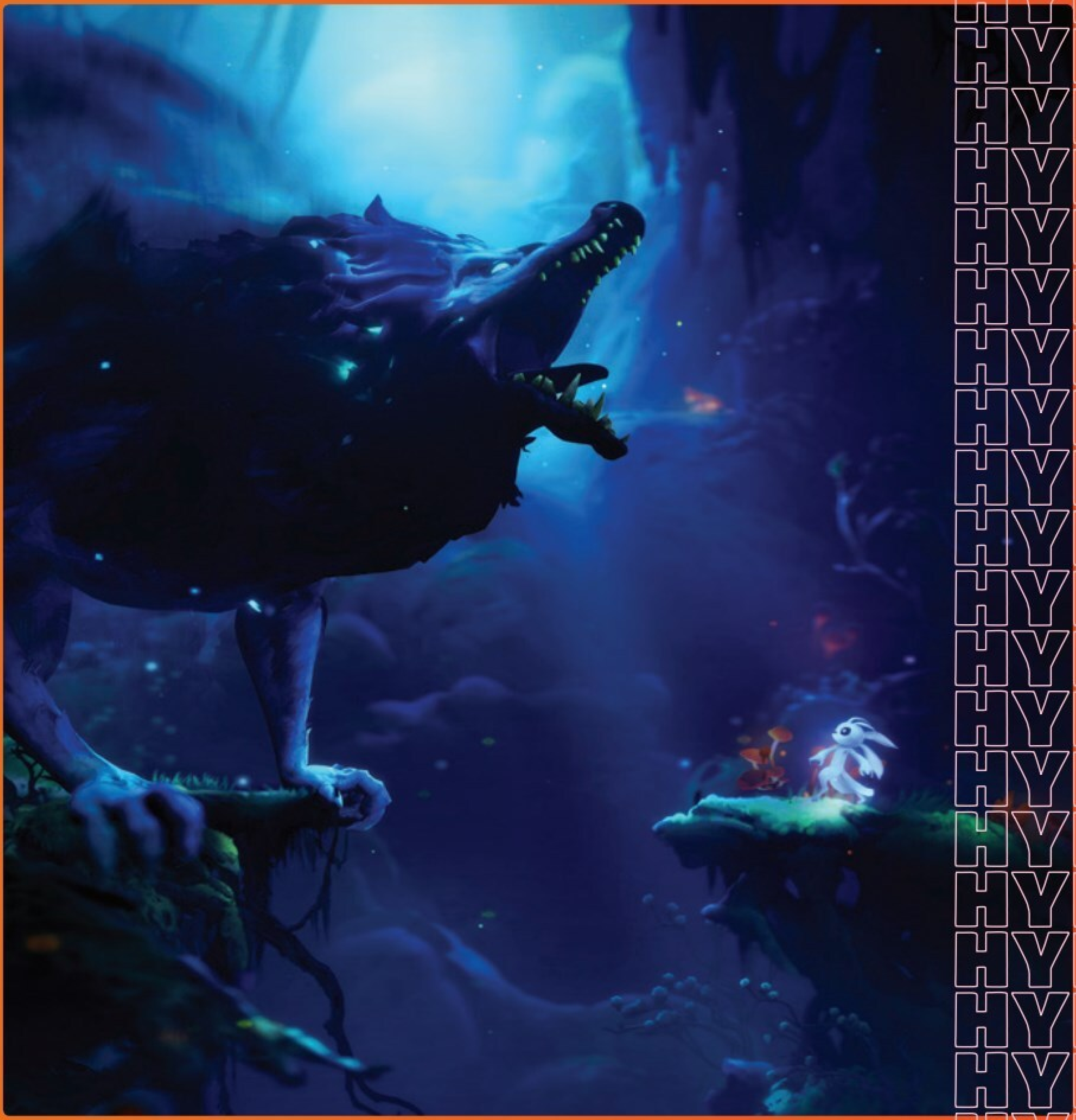




Outer Wilds

2019 Xbox One, PC

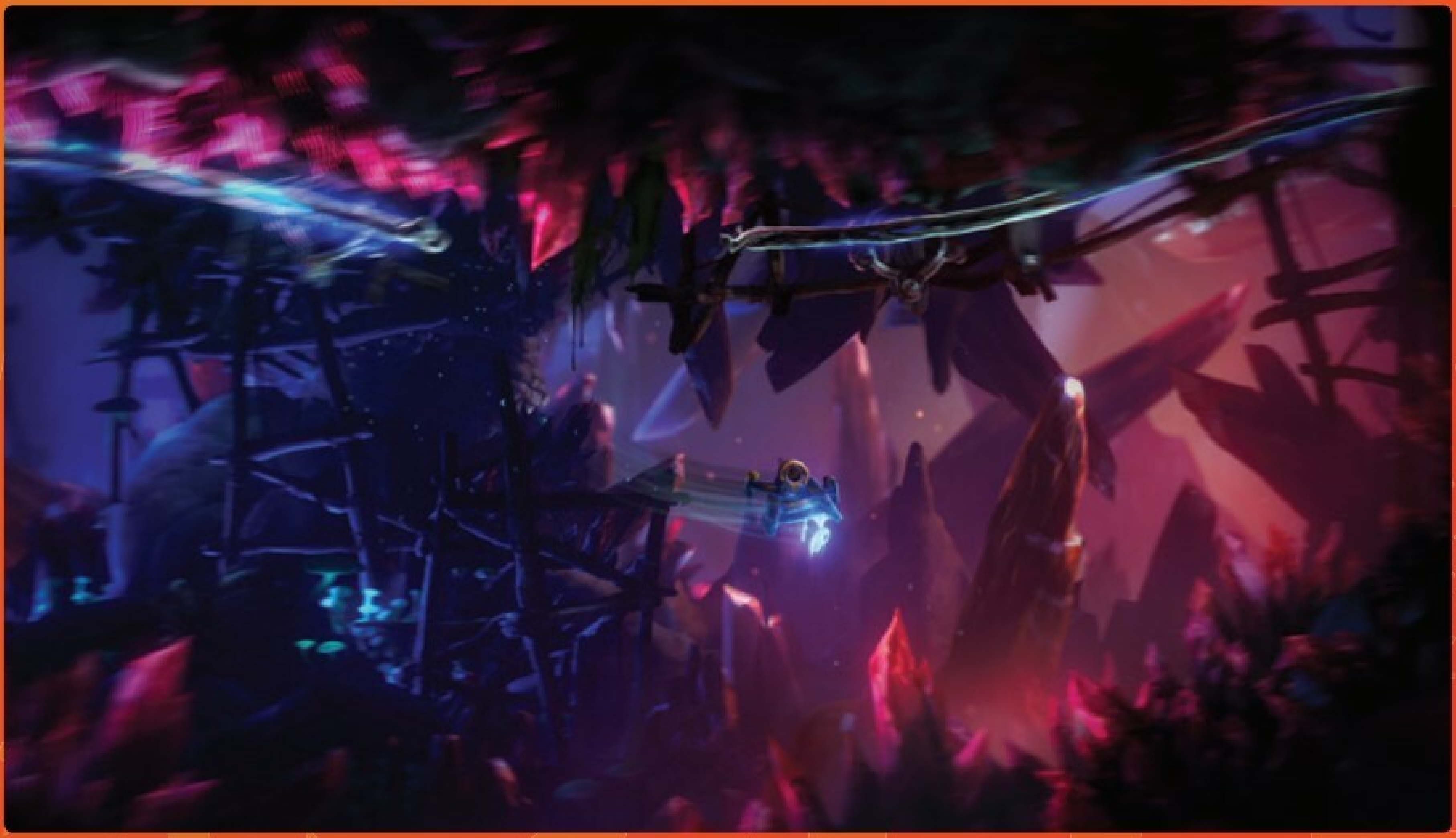
Outer Wilds is all about exploring a big hand-crafted solar system, but a Majora's Mask-like conceit gives this game a unique flair. Instead of dying and restarting when you do something like crash your ship or fly a little too close to the sun, you are sent back in time with the knowledge you gained before you met your demise. Our hands-on time has left us impressed with the scale of the worlds and made us excited to explore its loop of exploring, dying, going back in time, and launching our ship all over again.



Ori and the Will of the Wisps

2019 Xbox One, PC

The charming, gorgeous surprise Ori and the Blind Forest married Metroid-style overworld exploration with high-speed, precise platforming. Will of the Wisps looks just as beautiful – if not more so – and continues the journey of Ori as it grapples with what it must do next to continue to protect the forest it calls home. Frankly, all we needed to hear was that more Ori was on the way to get us excited, but everything we've seen of the games looks like it will live up to the high bar established by the first game.



The Outer Worlds

2019 PS4, Xbox One, PC

The Outer Worlds comes from the minds behind the original Fallout games and the studio that created Fallout: New Vegas. This adventure leaves behind a nuclear war-torn Earth for a story in the stars, but the sensibilities that fans loved in that post-apocalyptic franchise are present here. Taking place in a future where a series of mega corporations have begun to terraform alien planets, you are a crew member awoken from hypersleep before everyone else on a crashed ship. Over the course of your journey you gain companions, shoot monsters, and travel between planets as you explore a universe with a subversive sense of humor. For a whole lot more on The Outer Worlds, you can read our cover story on page 34.

Psychonauts 2

2019 PS4, Xbox One, PC

Since the original Psychonauts' credits rolled when the game released in 2005, we've been eager to see what's next for Raz's story. Double Fine has taken some time to return to this universe, but we're excited that day is nearly upon us. The quality virtual reality spin-off Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin makes us excited to see where a world with mind-exploring technology can go next. For the sequel, Raz has graduated from summer camp, and is assisting the Psychonaut Headquarters in repairing the damage done when its leader was kidnapped.

Gears 5

2019 Xbox One, PC

Despite being a continuation of the story, Gears of War 4 was essentially a reboot. It introduced a trio of new protagonists and a new threat. Gears 5 (which drops the 'of War' part of the name) follows Kait and Delmot as they journey to go, "Back to where it all began." Developer The Coalition promises Gears 5 will have the biggest world the series has ever enjoyed, and footage from the game shows an impressive diversity of environments with snowy areas, jungles, and even one location that looks like it's on Mars.

Spelunky 2

2019 PS4, PC

Spelunky is a tough-as-nails roguelike platformer that tasks an Indiana Jones-like explorer with surviving an ever-changing series of descending caves. For the sequel, developer Mossmouth has teamed up with Bitworks, the studio that ported the original game to PSN. This time you play as Ana Spelunky, who is exploring a series of caves on an alien planet. The game features co-op options, other playable characters (one of whom is a sloth), and all kinds of new weapons and abilities. Just to name a few additions, we've seen a cloning gun that can help you solve some light platforming puzzles, and a jetpack which will obviously improve your vertical capabilities.

Doom Eternal

2019 PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

After a 12-year hiatus, Doom returned with a bloody explosion in 2016 recalling the over-the-top violence that made the original a cultural touchstone. Doom Eternal features all kinds of new abilities, weapons, kill animations, and twice as many demon types as the previous game. You also have access to the "Meat Hook" which is a versatile grappling hook for moving toward enemies or moving enemies toward you. These new destructive toys make you even more mobile and deadlier than before. ◈

Mortal Kombat 11

New and unusual punishments

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
NetherRealm
Studios

» Release
April 23

Mortal Kombat remains one of the most successful fighting game series of all time, but Ed Boon and the team at NetherRealm Studios aren't resting on their laurels. "We don't want to just release a game that feels like a prettier-skinned version of the previous one," Boon says. "We really want people to play it and go, 'Wow, there's a lot of things that are different.'" And after digging into Mortal Kombat 11 for a couple of hours, it's sporting plenty of major differences.

Although there will be a few set variations of every character (as was the case in Mortal Kombat X), 11 lets you build your own version of your favorite fighter from scratch, both visually and mechanically. Scorpion, for example, now follows up his iconic spear with a sword slash that knocks the opponent down, but you can tweak it to end with a devastating punch instead, allowing for follow-up combos. You can also throw in completely new moves, such as one where Scorpion twirls his spear by its chain.

Meter usage has also undergone a complete overhaul. Running, and the stamina meter which governed it in Mortal Kombat X, are gone. This makes it harder to pursue your opponent and smother them with mix-ups and relentless aggression. "It's focused more on what they call 'footsies,' jockeying, space control," Boon tells me. "Our arenas are smaller, and it's a lot more about strategy than all-out aggression."

Instead of one longer meter that forced players to consider multiple contrasting options, there is now an offensive and defensive meter, both of which fill up automatically. The offensive meter governs amplified moves, which usually extend combos. We also saw that some moves can be amplified in multiple ways, depending on which input you use after the special attack lands.

The defensive meter, meanwhile, lets you use interactable objects around the stage, escape combos in mid-air, and roll out of the way after being knocked down. Some maneuvers, like using new bespoke wake-up attacks, use both meters. Finally, X-Rays have been replaced with Fatal Blows, super moves you can only use once your health bar is mostly gone.

Combos are shorter this time around and are as much about setting up different scenarios after the combo than squeezing out raw damage from a single blow. One reason to adapt your combos on the fly are krushing blows. Moves with a krushing-blow property can deal devastating damage and allow for longer combos under the right conditions, but can only be activated once per match. Some krushing blows require you to pull off the move as a

Confirmed Roster

Along with these confirmed fighters, NetherRealm has also revealed that Ronda Rousey will be providing Sonya Blade's voice. We also asked Ed Boon about fan-favorite Cassie Cage, to which he replied, "Cassie Cage, I'm a big fan."

- Baraka
- Geras
- Raiden
- Scorpion
- Shao Kahn
- Skarlet
- Sonya Blade
- Sub-Zero

counter-hit, while others may require more delicate maneuvering, such as using the amplified version of a move a certain number of times before you can turn it into a krushing blow.

These myriad changes can make even familiar favorites like Scorpion play wildly different, while some returning characters sport new tricks. Skarlet, who last made an appearance in Mortal Kombat 9, has new moves to complement her visual overhaul, like a low-hitting blood-based projectile and a long-range tentacle. Baraka has a new banner he can plant on the ground, which powers up his attacks when he's near and can be used to impale his opponent. We also have at least one new confirmed new fighter, Geras, who uses a collection of sand and time-based abilities, including the ability to manipulate the in-game timer.

Though Boon wouldn't tell us who else might be on the roster, he says it won't introduce as many new fighters as Mortal Kombat X. "I think if we had like a needle, it'd lean a little bit more towards servicing those players who want to see their favorite return," Boon says. The story seems to lean that way as well. After the events of Mortal Kombat X, the balance of power has tipped far too heavily toward the side of good, which causes a new character named Kronika to emerge. Kronika aims to restore the balance of power by rewinding time, which means there will be plenty of chance encounters between older and newer iterations of the same characters.

Outside of the confirmed seven we know so far (see sidebar), a few other characters have been hinted at. Kabal was teased as part of the game's unveiling ceremony, while Liu Kang, Kung Lao, and Kitana were shown in trailers. We also saw some pre-fight banter from Cassie Cage, heavily implying she'll be playable.

You can also expect challenge towers (now called towers of time) to return. You can now select limited-use modifiers to help you out during your fights, such as the ability to take reduced damage, trap your opponents in a bubble, or summon another character for assists. While these are a fun counterbalance to the absurd challenges towers can often provide, I see some potential for microtransactions in them, though nothing has been announced as of yet.

With this many changes at play, I can't say for sure they'll shake up the pacing of Mortal Kombat's brutal fights, even after a couple of hours with it. But it's exciting to see NetherRealm experiment this thoroughly with its premiere series, and I can't wait to dig into everything Mortal Kombat 11 has to offer, both old and new, when it hits this April. » **Suriel Vazquez**

Anthem

Plotting the course before liftoff

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
BioWare

» Release
February 22

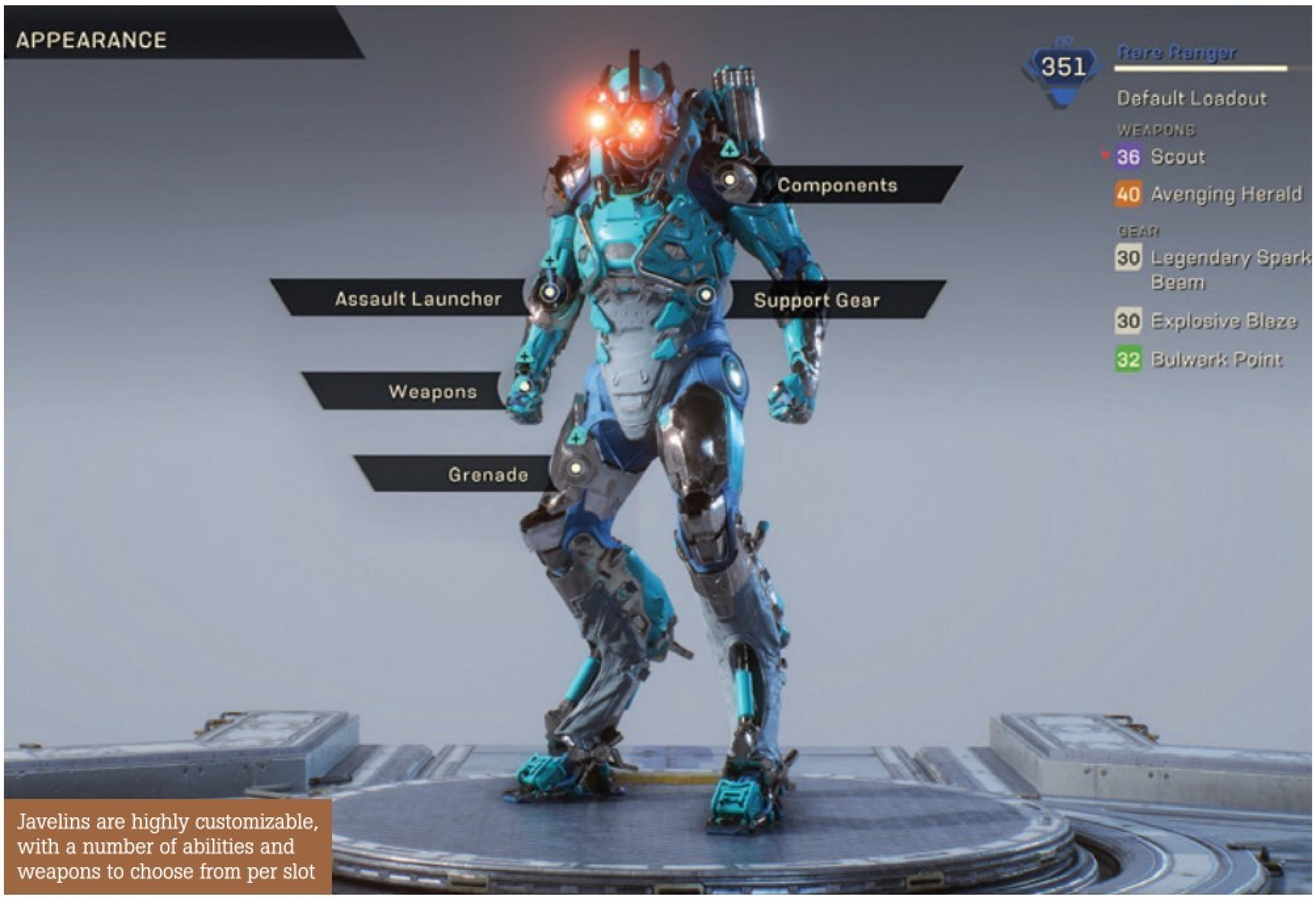
Online shooter-RPGs like Anthem often don't show their true colors until players have sunk dozens of hours into them, as the empowering fantasy of acquiring powerful gear can dilute after hours of runs through repeat content. I had the chance to play several hours of Anthem one final time before launch, starting with the introductory missions as the jack-of-all-trades ranger class and finishing with a handful of endgame missions with fully a leveled storm class. This extensive look shed some light on how Anthem's long-term ecosystem will work, which raises questions about how enticing the gear loop might be as a whole, but also highlights how Anthem could stand apart from the crowd when it releases later this month.

The combination of flight, hovering, and dashes give Anthem a wonderful sense of mobility. Stringing together different maneuvers as you work through missions feels great, though flight takes some time to get used to. Early on, it felt more like a travel tool than a core part of encounters. These skirmishes were fairly simple, but allowed me to mess around with the other Javelin types to see their capabilities.

While the Ranger gives an effective, if standard, take on firefights, the Interceptor provides a more evasive, close-range approach, and the Storm class dishes out damage from afar. The differences are more than weaponry, too. The Storm can effectively skirt the edges of a fight by hovering indefinitely while the Colossus lurches around at its center with high armor and wide attack angles. When I dug into them and swapped different toolkits around, the flexibility of each class became apparent, as I tried different skill builds themed around certain elements or combos.

Late-game encounters take place in more intricate and vertical arenas, which makes mid-combat flight more viable. Once I had the hang of them, Anthem's missions were fun overall, even as some objectives (like planting a macguffin on the ground and defending it from waves of enemies) cropped up multiple times.

Unfortunately, this variety and distinctiveness didn't carry over to the loot. Although the scores of guns I acquired all had different cadences and effective ranges, individual guns in the same class didn't stand apart enough to favor or become attached to any of them. These differences could become more apparent with time and more learned



Javelins are highly customizable, with a number of abilities and weapons to choose from per slot

stat-obsessing, but even after I got my hands on late-game weaponry, most of my inventory felt interchangeable – a worrying concern in a game about running missions repeatedly for the chance to get a new gun.

Across all of the demos, I also got hints of how Anthem's storytelling might seep in through and between missions, and here too I saw glimpses of greatness poking through some concerns. Fort Tarsis acts as the main hub for learning more about Anthem's world and characters between missions. These first-person conversations are all animated surprisingly well and ran the gamut from lore dumps from otherwise uninteresting characters to lively, personal conversations with likeable people. A couple of individual moments, such as one in which the person you're talking to decks a runaway thief mid-sentence, stand out, but with only disjointed exposure to characters and plot points, the narrative felt ancillary to the overall experience rather than integral.

These conversations also factor into a faction reputation system that provides different weapon blueprints, though lead producer Mike Gamble says that with enough time, you'll be able to stand on great terms with everyone. Finally, you can also find bits of lore scattered around Fort Tarsis, which are added to an in-game lore tab called the Cortex.

I also encountered a few issues with the online servers, including a couple of outages, matchmaking issues, and lag, which caused some enemies to continue to animate for a couple of seconds after dying. This led to some wasted ammo and ultimates. It's hard to know if these issues in my self-contained session will transfer over to the live environment, however.

As for post-launch plans, Gamble says they plan to keep a steady stream of new activities going. I saw some daily, weekly, and monthly challenges as I played, but as to what the focus, release schedule, and potential pricing of more substantial content might be depends on what the community latches onto.

I may not have the full picture on Anthem even after several hours, but my time with it has put its overall structure into focus. While the narrative and loot grind could still falter in the long-term if they're not enticing enough to pull me through dozens of hours of combat, the encounters and classes left me optimistic and eager to play more later this month. » **Suriel Vazquez**

The Elder Scrolls Online: Elsweyr

The year of the dragon

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
» Style
MMO
» Publisher
Bethesda Softworks
» Developer
ZeniMax Online Studios
» Release
June 4

ZeniMax Online Studios is taking a different approach with the next Elder Scrolls Online expansion. Instead of being one giant chunk, Elsweyr will be dished out over the course of the year, with new content flowing during each segment. In addition to a bold new class that players have clamored for forever, the necromancer, adventurers find themselves facing down one of fantasy's favorite monsters with a deluge of dragons.

Four giant updates planned for 2019 bring the expansion to life, with the dragon dive beginning in June. Elsweyr is a huge new landmass for players to explore, the home of the cat race Khajiit. The zone is similar in size and scope to previous expansion offerings such as Summerset Isles, featuring around 30 hours of main quest action. The new zone comes with a smattering of content, including the aforementioned necromancer class, a 12-player trial in the Sunspire, dragon attack world events, delves, public dungeons, and one-off quests. While the necromancer's kit has yet to be seen, we expect dark magic and leading armies of the undead to be part of the package.

Big, bold dragons are the focus for players to investigate and take down in this expansion, meaning raiders and end-game centric folks have some epic encounters to engage with. While it's fun taking on Dwemer machinations and esoteric wizards, there's something to be said for a giant contingent of one of fantasy's most revered monsters heading into the spotlight for this content block.

As with previous expansions, veteran players can jump right in, but new players and characters should be right at home as well. Due to level scaling, freshly rolled necromancers (and other classes) can engage with Elsweyr immediately.

Staggered content releases are often a question mark for player bases, but I can't wait to embrace the dark designs of the necromancer and take on some fire-belching beasts this summer.
» Daniel Tack

Dragon attack world encounters will get you teaming up outside of dungeons and raids

Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey

Evolution is monkey business

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
Panache Digital Games

» Release
2019

As the creator of the original Assassin's Creed series, Patrice Désilets is no stranger to historical recreations. However, with his newest game, Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey, Désilets aims to bring players further back in time than ever before. Spanning the distance between 10 million and 2 million years ago, players guide a lineage of hominids as they slowly evolve into the earliest humans.

"I didn't know I was considered this historical guy," Désilets says. "I didn't know it was part of my brand, but as soon as I started to pitch ideas to investors that weren't attached to historical stuff, people said, 'Yeah, it's cool, but where's Assassin's Creed?'"

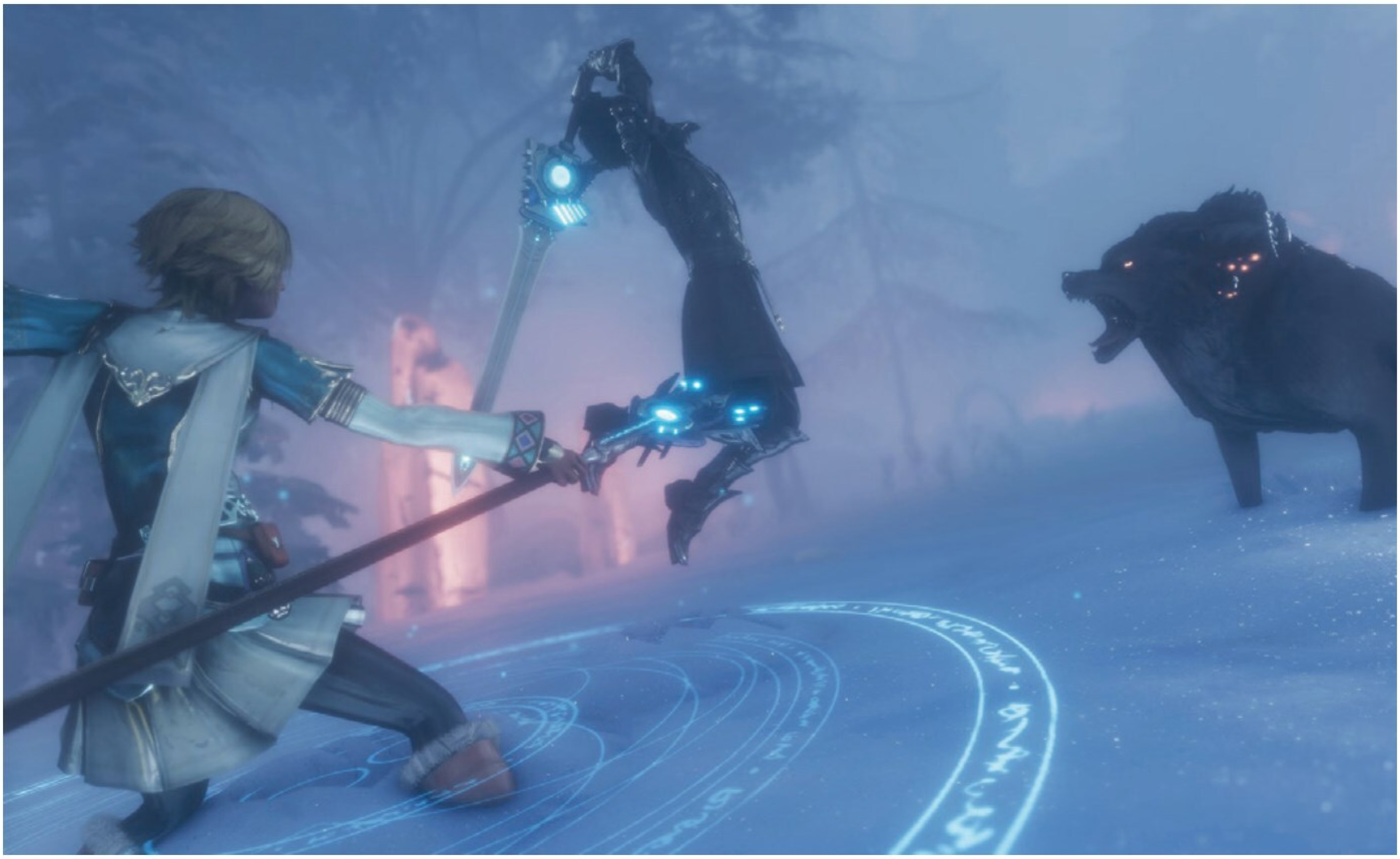
Ancestors isn't exactly Assassin's Creed, but the two games share some DNA. In Ancestors, players can climb up any object, tree, or hill within a massive open world. On the other hand, Ancestors' narrative is more freeform than Désilets' previous work, and the action features a greater emphasis on survival as players guide a clan of ancient apes through various jungles, savannah, and swamplands. Throughout this journey, players explore new areas, learn which plants are safe to eat, and build rudimentary tools to defend themselves from wild animals.

"You affect your environment," Désilets says. "In our video for the Game Awards, we wanted to have an encounter with a saber-toothed tiger, but we eventually killed them all trying to get the shot, so there were none left in the map. Resources are something that can deplete depending on how many people are in your clan. You cannot stay in the same place the whole time. Eventually you will have to move, because you will have consumed all the resources."

Ancestors also features an objective checklist that players can tackle at their own pace. Since Ancestors does not contain NPC quest givers, players must discover these achievement-style tasks hidden throughout the game world. For example, upon entering a swampland, your hominid clan might encounter crocodiles, and if you successfully defend yourself from these beasts, you will be rewarded with neuronal energy. This neuronal energy functions like experience points, which can be used to evolve the entire hominid species – giving your apes new talents like greater stability while walking upright, faster movement speed in water, or the ingenuity to create new tools.

"You create your own adventure and try to evolve into the next species as you do it," Désilets says. "I don't want to say everything because then I'm spoiling the core nature of the game, which is about exploration and discovery. Basically, we're asking players, 'Hey *Homo sapiens*! Are you intelligent enough to survive like your ancestors did? Are you curious enough to discover and try new things? Are you courageous enough to go onto the other side of the hill and explore new territory?'"

Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey is the first independent game from Désilets and his new studio Panache Digital Games, but the team hopes it will also be the first volume in a larger trilogy that explores humanity's ancient roots. Hopefully, Panache gets to see that vision to completion, because we're eager to see how this story ends. » **Ben Reeves**



Edge Of Eternity

Bringing together Japanese and Western RPG sensibilities

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Midgar Studio

» Developer
Midgar Studio

» Release
TBA

The RPG genre has its share of contributions from both sides of the Pacific Ocean. You can't deny the impact of early games like Wizardry and Ultima, while Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy helped popularize the genre on consoles. Both sides have continued to advance the genre in different ways. French developer Midgar Studio wants to take some of the best elements of both styles and fuse them for its own vision with Edge of Eternity. The crowdfunded project recently hit Early Access to give a sample of what's in store.

Midgar Studio's appreciation for JRPGs is easy to spot, especially in the anime-infused art style and soundtrack from famed composer Yasunori Mitsuda. The turn-based combat feels right at home, but the developers are also taking a page from Western design by giving the player more choice with how to solve quests and varying consequences for their actions.

In this sci-fi adventure, strange metal airships touch down on a land called Heryon, bringing gifts of advanced technology. Of course, ulterior motives are at play, and soon the invaders try to take over, mining the soil and stealing powerful crystals. This all leads to a war, where the enemy unleashes a sickness called The Corrosion; it poisons, twists limbs, and warps people into half-organic, half-machine beings. The story follows a brother and sister, Daryon and Selene, searching for their mother, who has caught this horrific disease.

The tactical, Active Time Battle system requires thought, as rushing a turn can be costly. You have your basic attack, magic, and item choices, but positioning and timing are also of the essence. Battles operate on hexagonal spaces, and sometimes your best option might be moving to a safer place to avoid getting hit by spells, charge attacks, or traps. You also have an ability to interrupt attacks by striking while the enemy is acting. Random elements additionally influence battles, with crystals that heal opponents each turn and the time of day and weather bringing challenge and rewards. So far, I like the ideas behind the combat, but battles do drag on.

The progression system revolves heavily around weapons. Every weapon levels up, but you also have different branches you can follow for its skills and stat boosts. To take these paths, you need to insert crystals into your weapon, which has its own grid, showing the required crystal element you need to advance. It reminds a bit of Final Fantasy X's sphere grid, but smaller and tied to individual weapons.

Edge of Eternity is far from complete and still a little rough around the edges, but it's ambitious and worth keeping an eye on if you're a diehard RPG fan. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Skater XL

Concrete playground

» **Platform**
PC

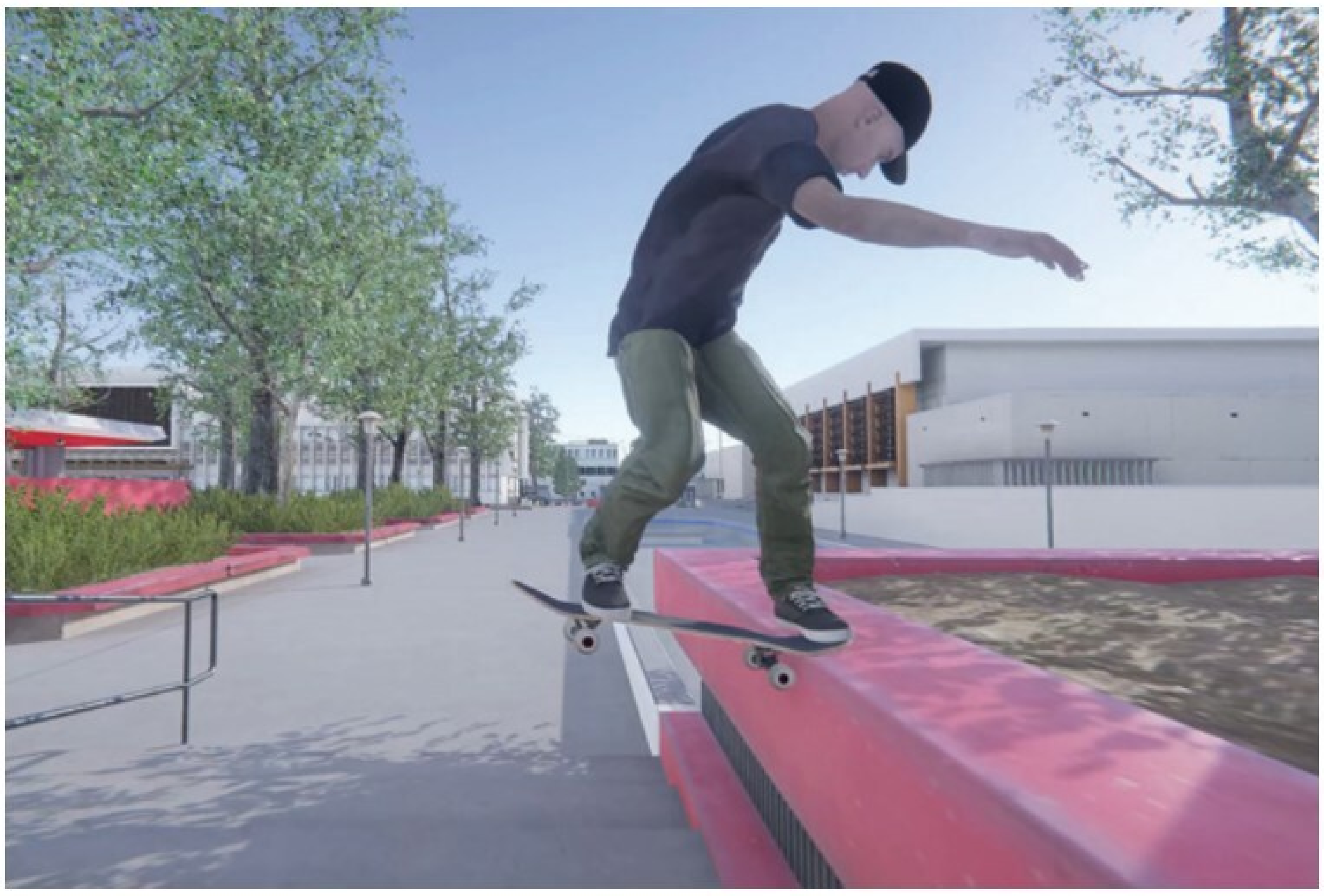
» **Style**
1-Player Sports
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Easy Day Studios

» **Developer**
Easy Day Studios

» **Release**
2019

The possibilities and challenges of a new skate spot are always exciting, and one has just been found on Steam Early Access: Skater XL. Developer Easy Day Studios' focus on physics aims to produce realistic board flips and spins without being needlessly complicated or frustrating. The title is already showing lots of promise; in my hands-on time with an early slice of the game, pulling off tricks felt less like watching canned sequences unfold and more like controlling a dynamic marionette.



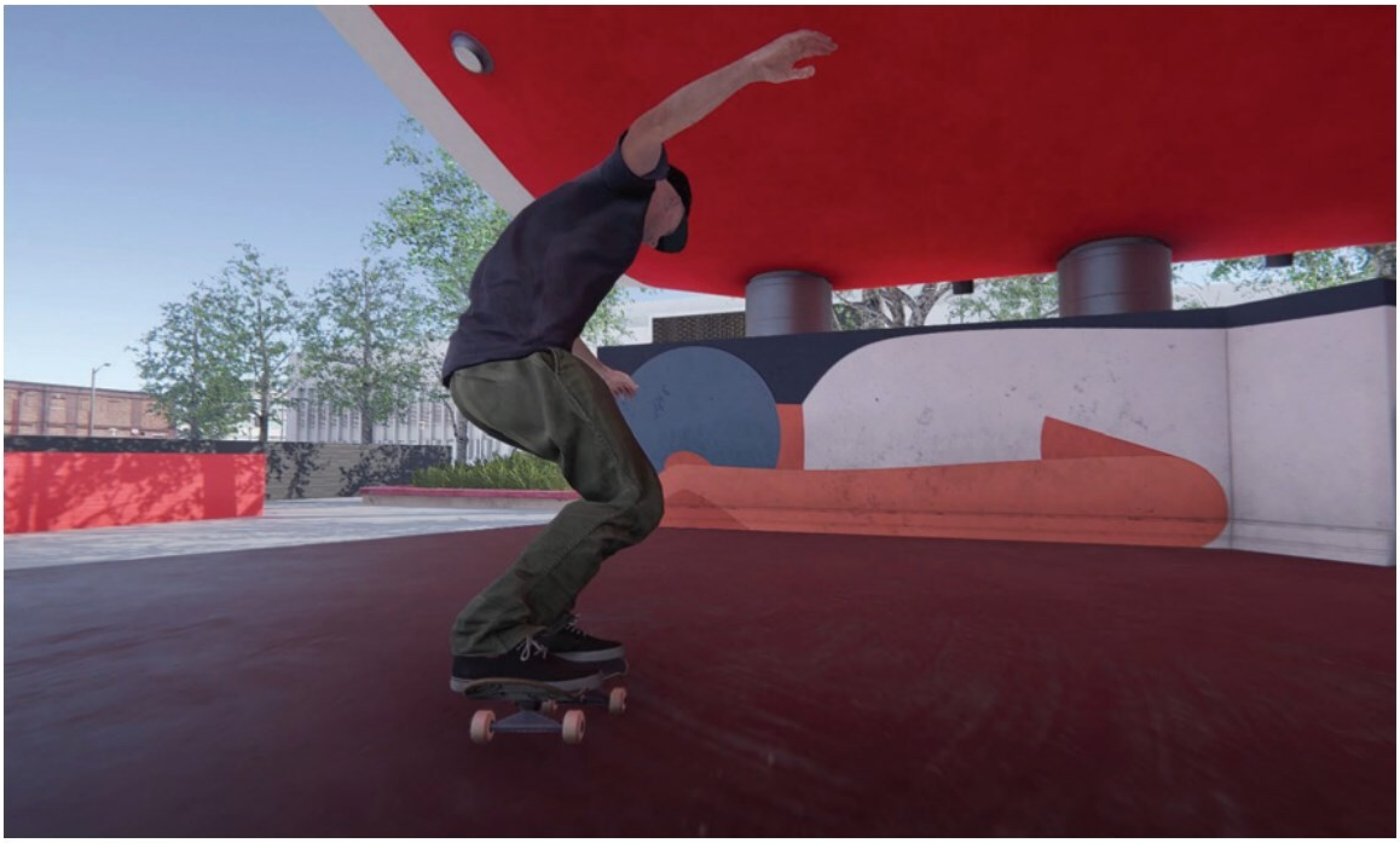
Each foot of your skater is mapped to one of the controller's analog sticks. While this may sound like it could be more unwieldy than jumping on a board in real life, in game it works very well. The benefit, and what separates Skater XL from series like Tony Hawk and Skate – as great as they were – is the control it grants. Board flips can be stopped in mid-air or they can keep spinning as long as you have the time, space, and timing of when to land the trick. Similarly, you can spin your board at a slower speed if you want a more controlled style.

"It's physics-based," says Dain Hedgpeth, director and co-founder of Easy Day Studios, "but it's not absolutely grueling. Physics doesn't mean it's a sim, and simulation is not a designed experience. This is a designed experience where we pick which parts of the physics you actually engage in and how that mapping actually goes from the user's intent into the gameplay to make it fun, make it feel like skateboarding."

Thus, Skater XL hopes to have the best of both worlds – a title that gives you enough freedom to tweak a crooked grind or perform a double-flip even though there aren't specific trick commands for such moves, but that avoids just throwing the player into a world of physics that could play out more like a rag-doll simulator than an exciting skating title.

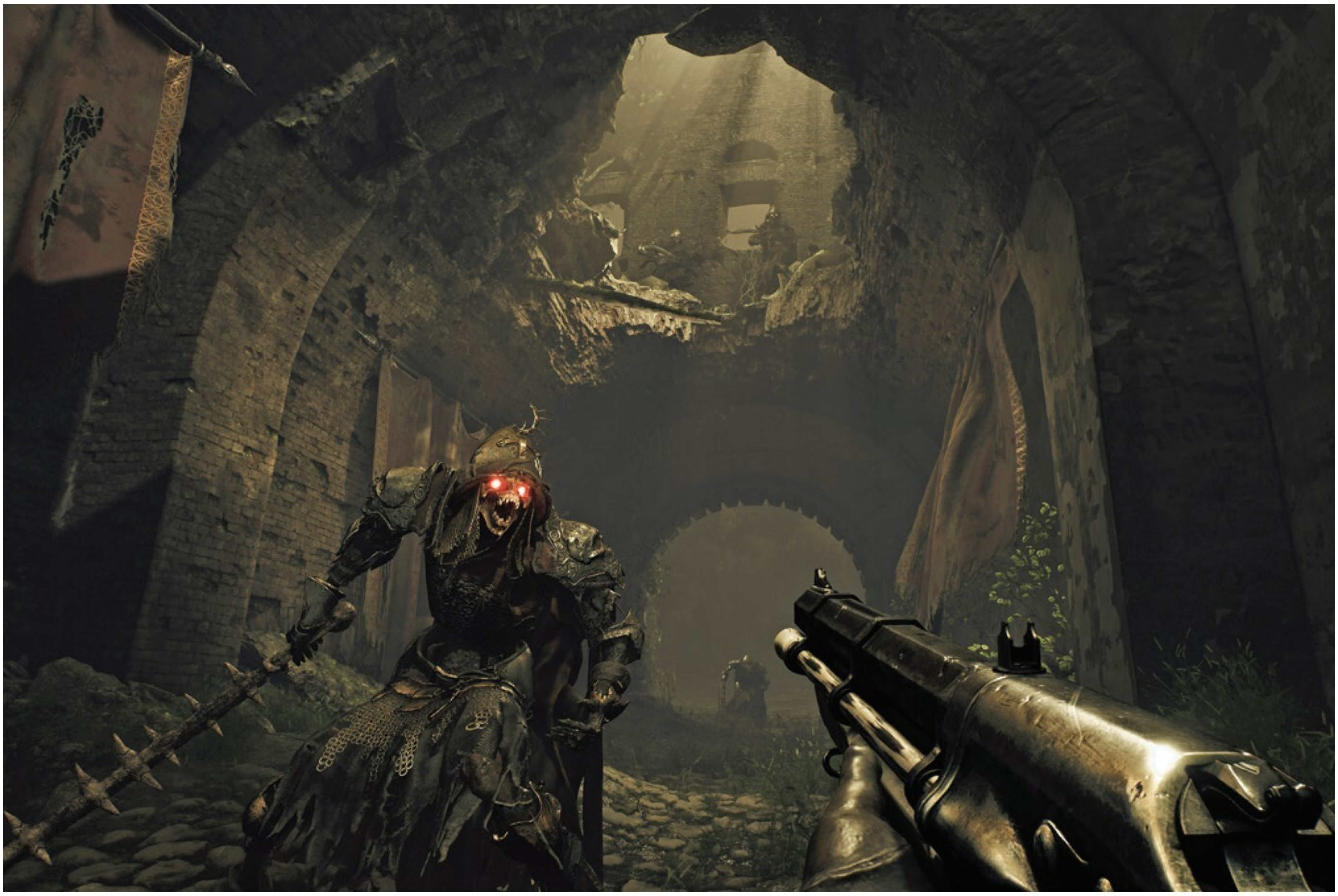
Expanding on this bag of tricks, Hedgpeth says the team is expecting to implement grabs before release, although transition skating (mini-ramps, vert, etc.) sounds like too tough of a nut to crack for this installment. Nevertheless, well-curated city and skatepark levels – along with the emergent gameplay – should provide enough scope so you have plenty to keep you busy.

As Skater XL's late 2019 full release target approaches, Hedgpeth also says the team expects to include modding, licensed gear/skaters, and multiplayer. What about a scoring system? Right now, Hedgpeth says it suits multiplayer, but might not be the right approach for single-player, which sounds like it'll focus on freeskating. "Ultimately this game was built to be rewarding in and of itself," he says. "A little more reflective of skateboarding in the real world." » **Matthew Kato**



Witchfire

Bullets meet magic



» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter

» Publisher
The Astronauts

» Developer
The Astronauts

» Release
TBA

The Astronauts struck gold with The Vanishing of Ethan Carter, a mystery adventure game that sold over a million copies and received critical accolades galore. However, years before its release, the majority of The Astronauts' developers were working on memorable shooters like Painkiller and Bulletstorm at People Can Fly. With Witchfire, a shooter set in a world where witches are real and your job is to hunt them down, studio founder Adrian Chmielarz and his team are back in familiar, bullet-ridden territory. "We've juggled adventures and shooters for all of our professional lives," Chmielarz says. "My first two games were point-and-click adventures, but my third was a shooter. So the return to shooters was very natural, and actually refreshing."

Despite intimacy with the genre, it hasn't all been smooth sailing. The project that would become Witchfire was initially very different, a sci-fi post-apocalyptic survival experience filled with giant alien mechs. The Astronauts spent a whole year on the game before deciding that they didn't love what they were working on and changed gears, throwing everything into the wastebasket in order to start anew. So why trade mechs for witches? "I think I like the idea of evil you can't explain," Chmielarz tells us. "In sci-fi there's often an explanation, like a virus caused humans to turn into zombies or vampires are the result of an experiment gone wrong. An old-school horror or dark fantasy usually offers things that are evil just because they are evil, and I like this mystery."

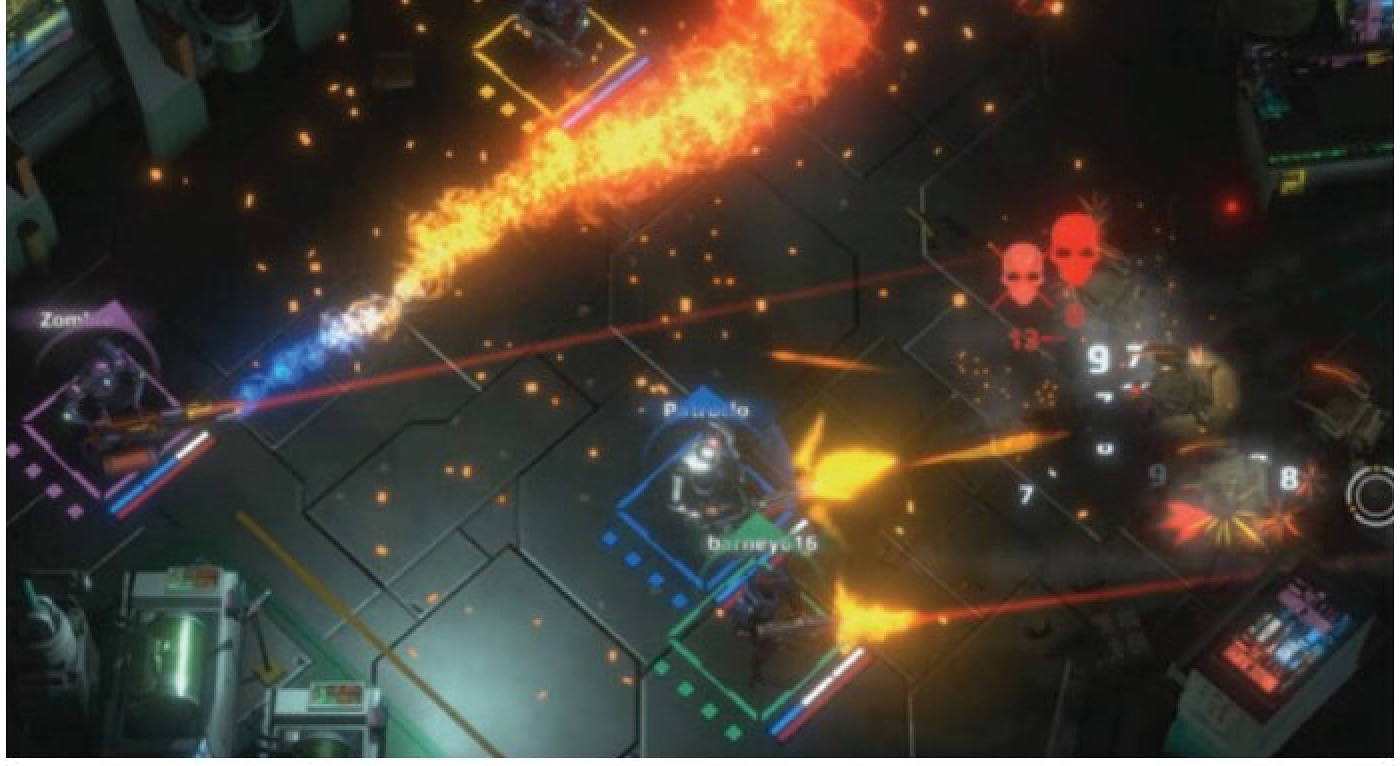
The Astronauts have kept a tight lid on Witchfire since its reveal at the 2017 Game Awards in the form of a trailer filled with revolvers blasting away at skeletal creatures and giants that wouldn't look out of place in Dark Souls. But while the clashing of firearms with dark fantastical imagery might get Painkiller fans excited, Chmielarz asserts that Witchfire is its own thing. Where Painkiller embraces zaniness, Witchfire goes in a more serious direction.

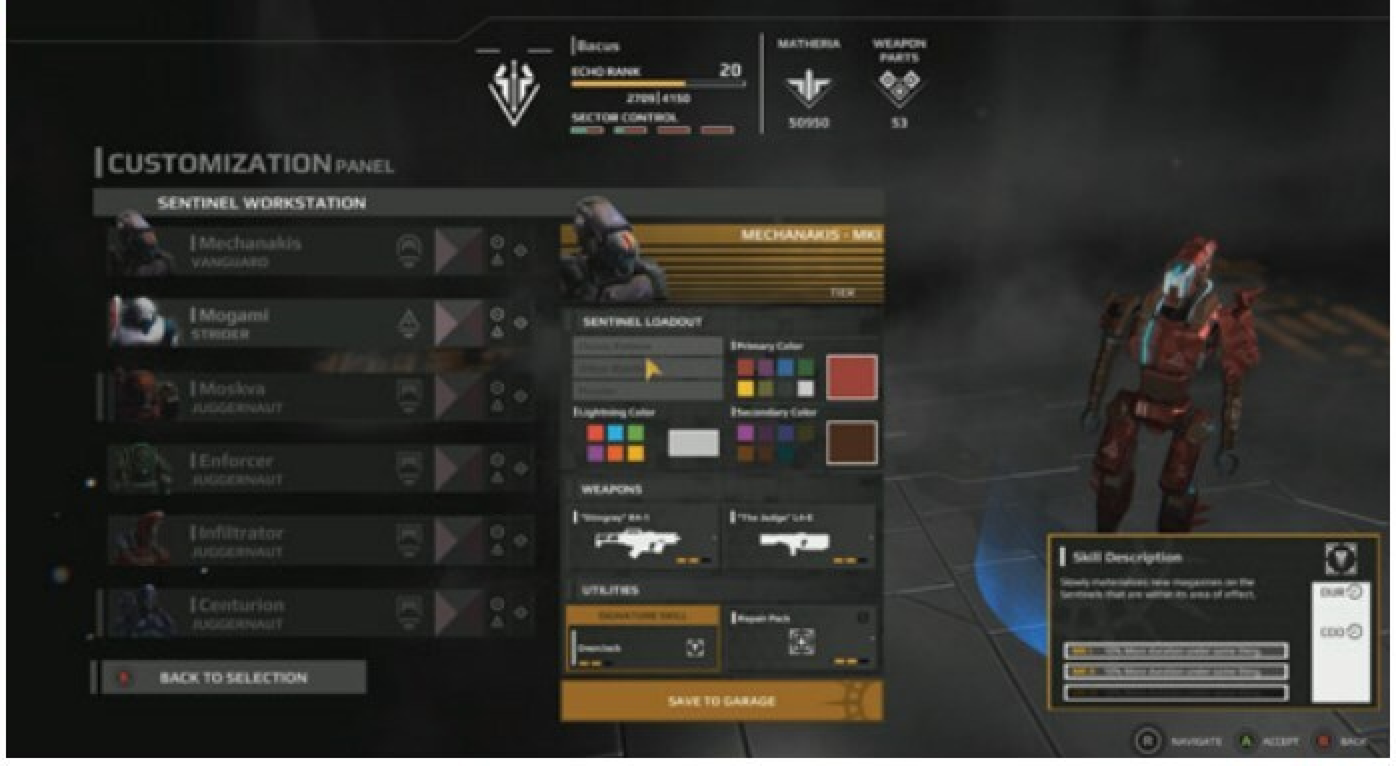
The developer also endeavors to make Witchfire an interesting narrative experience without aping the cinematic-driven campaign structure of titles like Call of Duty and Wolfenstein. "Witchfire is not a linear experience," Chmielarz says. "It's not a road to travel. It's a place corrupted by a powerful witch, a battlefield you fight many battles in. Having a lore instead of a linear story makes more sense for this kind of game."

The game is still a long way off, with The Astronauts stating that "2020 sounds reasonable" for release. The Astronauts are still developing the game's most important and intricate features, including weaponry. "Gunplay makes a shooter," Chmielarz states. "That's what we're focusing on right now. It's time consuming – we've worked over three months on a hand cannon archetype alone – but it's important. There will be more layers to Witchfire than just killing enemies, but I think that great gunplay is the *sine qua non* of a good shooter."

Though we haven't seen much of Witchfire since its trailer debut, the details we're learning as well as the pedigree behind the project hold a lot of promise. This is one witch-hunt we're actually excited about.

» **Javy Gwaltney**




CUSTOMIZATION PANEL
SENTINEL WORKSTATION
Mechanakis
Mogami
Moskva
Enforcer
Infiltrator
Centurion
MECHANAKIS - MKI
SENTINEL LOADOUT
WEAPONS
UTILITIES
BACK TO SELECTION
SAVE TO GARAGE
Skill Description

Trident's Wake

Protect humanity as a ghost in the shell

In the universe of Trident's Wake, humanity has reached a point where it has figured out space travel, but the more intriguing technology is the ability to place a human consciousness into a machine.

Trident's Wake is a local or online cooperative twin-stick shooter where you are a human consciousness that has been uploaded into a highly customizable Sentinel combat robot tasked with protecting the remainder of humanity housed on the massive ship, the eponymous *Trident's Wake*. You can upload your consciousness into Sentinels, different ones representing different classes, and customize their aesthetics and individual guns while tackling procedurally generated sectors of the massive ship.

Along with the interesting premise, the game sets itself apart from other twin-stick shooters in some unconventional ways. Reloading is manual, for example, and if you reload before using up your whole magazine, then you drop your unused bullets. "I'm used to having unlimited bullets," Bacus Studios' CEO Ignacio Baldini says, "But it was a design decision, to be honest. It fits the gritty atmosphere of the game and we wanted it to be more realistic." Baldini also wanted it to be a way to give the player more direct control over the shooting and make the player a more active participant.

Arranging your team class makeup is also important, and you can focus each of your guns' elements (like damage, reload speed, etc.) to individualize your chassis as much as possible. Baldini's hope is that after some time, everyone's chassis will look and play a little bit differently.

Trident's Wake enters early access on February 14 and will grow and change from there toward a release date that Bacus is not quite ready to commit to yet. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» Platform
PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Action (4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Graffiti Games

» Developer
Bacus Studios

» Release
TBA

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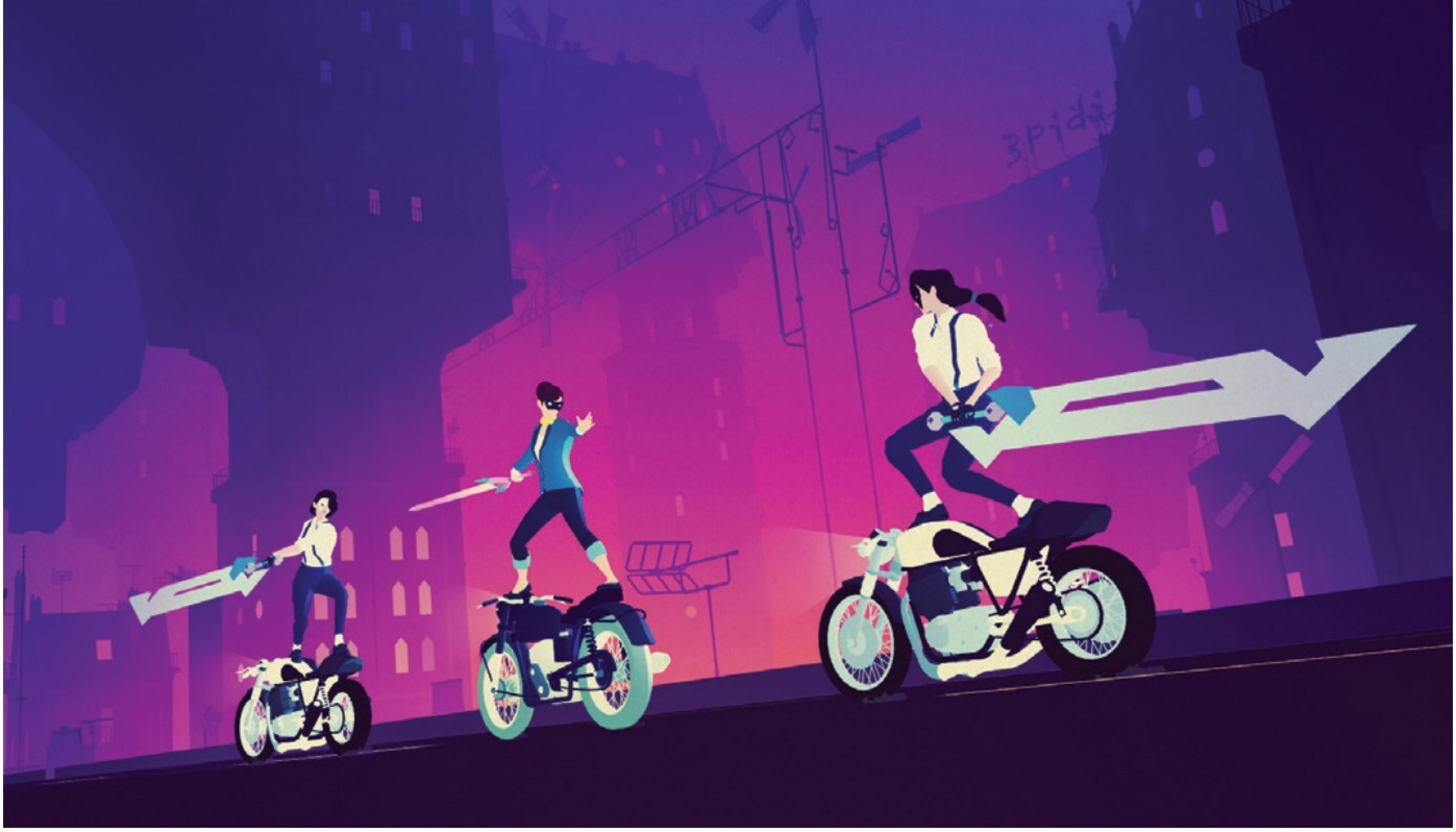


Sayonara Wild Hearts

Riding through a neon-colored world

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Annapurna Interactive

» Developer
Simogo

» Release
2019

Simogo, a Swedish developer best known for its thought-provoking mobile games like Device 6, is making a jump to something altogether different with Sayonara Wild Hearts. Simogo leaves behind slow-paced narratives for an action-filled musical adventure heavily inspired by Japanese culture, electric pop music, and tarot cards.

Sayonara Wild Hearts is about a young woman whose heartbreak disrupts the universe's balance. She follows a glowing butterfly in her dreams and is transported to a land where motorcyclists rule the highways in the skies. In this world, she is known as The Fool and rides motorcycles and skateboards through neon-colored cities, forests, and deserts. To restore harmony to the universe, she must take down rivaling gangs.

Simogo co-founder Simon Flesser, however, says the story is the least important part of Sayonara Wild Hearts since the developer wanted to try something new. "We went into this after doing three story-heavy games, so we knew when we started that story wasn't going to be a big thing this time."

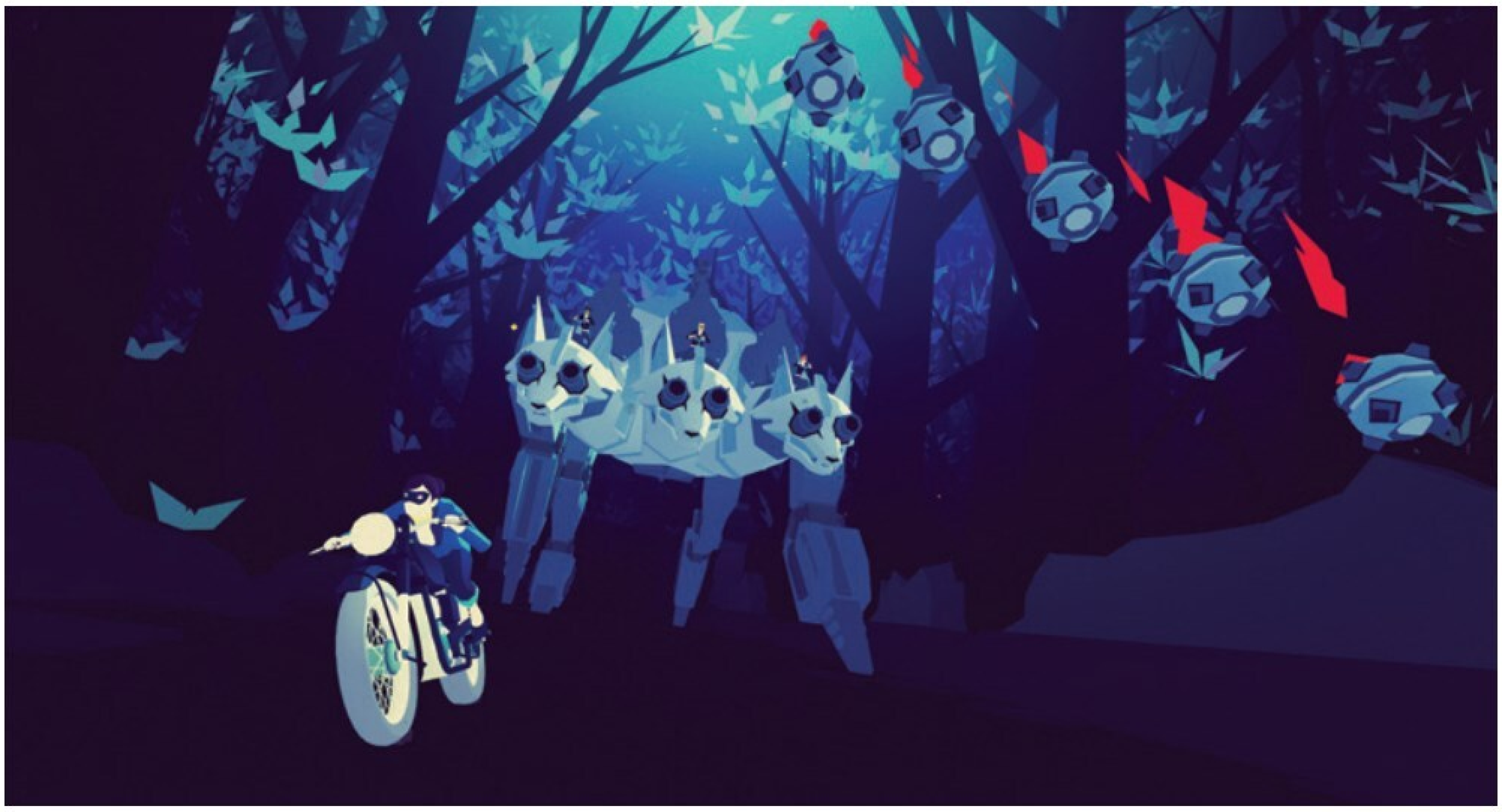
Flesser explains that Sayonara Wild Hearts is more about the "vibe and feel." From my brief playtime, the game plays smoothly despite its fast pace, and captivated me with both its stylish visuals and striking world. Each level has a race track that you ride on with your bike, ending with a battle against other gangs. Sometimes this is a sword fight, other times it's a dance-off. As you ride on the track, you attempt to collect as many floating hearts as possible to reach a new high score.

"At its core, it's very much a high-score game," Flesser says.

Sayonara Wild Hearts is a pastiche of inspirations from music to culture. It has very obvious visual influences from anime like Sailor Moon, to less obvious ones like Westerns. It draws inspiration from Flesser's childhood, too, including his time with '80s and '90s arcade games. "It plays with its inspirations in a pop, post-modern way," Flesser says. "It's very tongue-in-cheek."

One of the most notable features of Sayonara Wild Hearts is its music, which Simogo calls a "custom-made soundtrack," as they worked closely with the composer to give the game a music video vibe. "All of the music was specifically created for the game," Flesser says. "Every chapter has its own pop song."

With its colorful aesthetic and energetic music, we're curious to see how the final product fares when Sayonara Wild Hearts releases later this year on Switch. » **Elise Favis**



Yoshi's Crafted World

Constructing another cute adventure

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 or 2-Player
Platforming

» Publisher
Nintendo

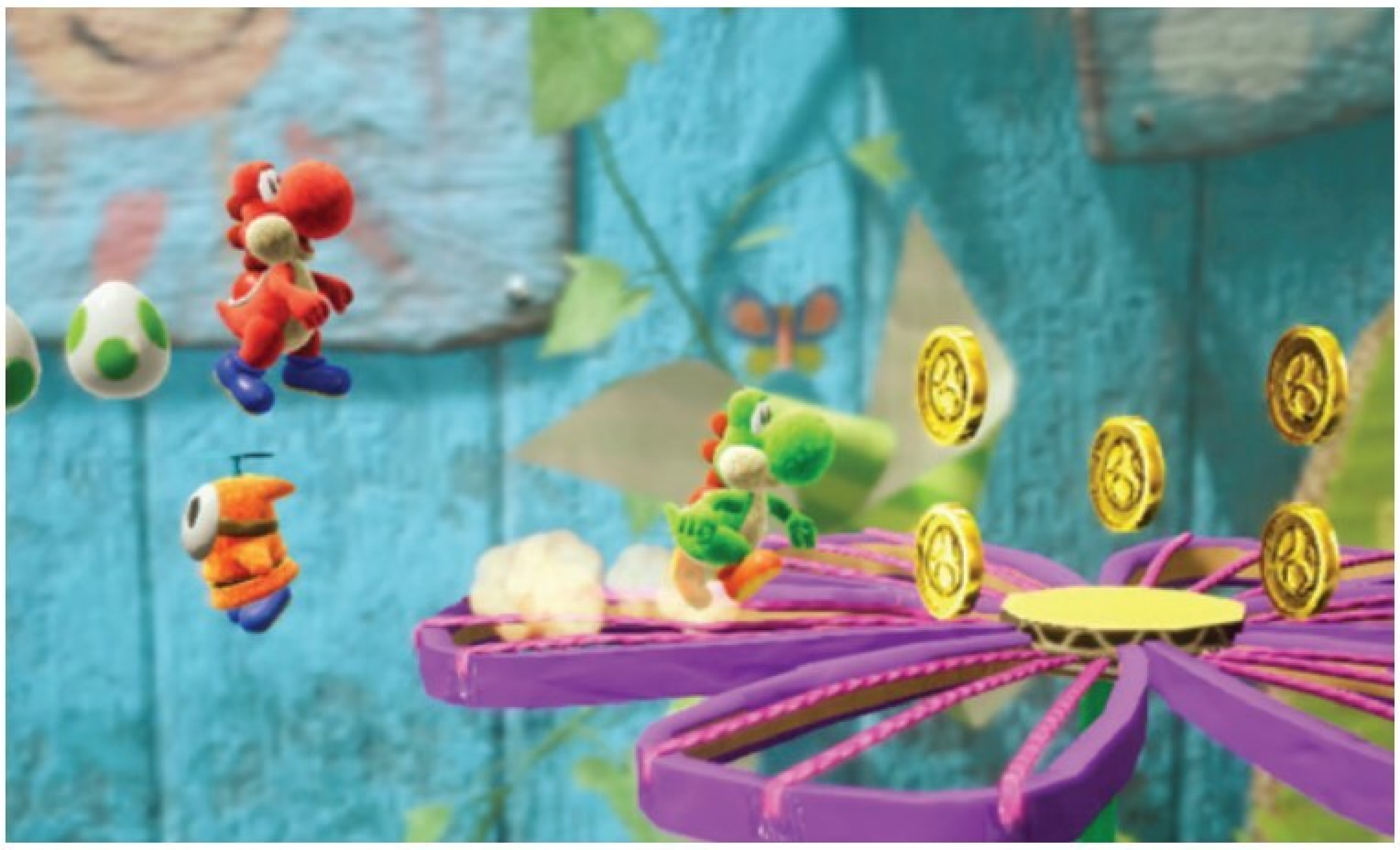
» Developer
Good Feel

» Release
March 29

When he's not serving as a mount for Nintendo's main mascot, Yoshi's adventures have seen him munching his way through babysitting gigs and woolly worlds. His latest platforming expedition removes the fuzzy yarn look while doubling down on the arts-and-crafts theme. Yoshi's Crafted World puts players in levels made of cardboard and other household items, exploring for secrets as fuzzy, felt dinos.

The levels are made up of items like duct tape, paper plates, and plastic cups, giving the game a handcrafted feel. One of the first levels Nintendo showed off is candy themed, with caramel enemies, macaron springs, and marshmallow platforms, while another uses a ninja theme featuring shy guys throwing origami stars and bendy straws positioned like bamboo.

As usual, Kamek and Baby Bowser are hassling the fun-loving Yoshis, this time attempting to steal their gem-filled treasure, the Sundream Stone. The Yoshis don't go down without a fight, and in the ensuing struggle, the gems fly in different directions. Yoshi's Crafted World delivers gameplay similar to previous Yoshi games. Players platform and hurl eggs as they come face to face with hundreds of shy guys and other mischievous minions.

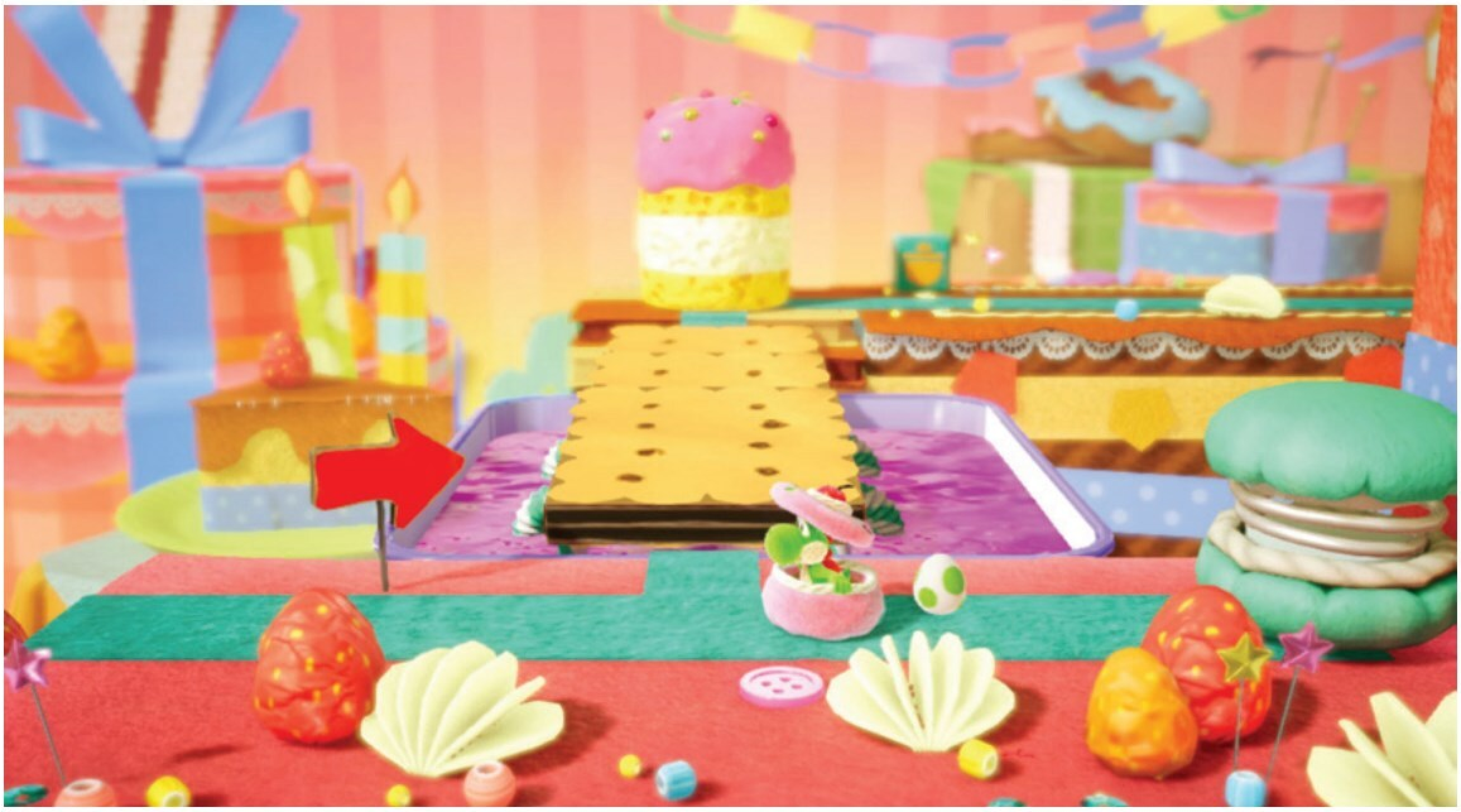


Throughout the stages, you can find Yoshi's cute canine friend Poochy. Riding on Poochy allows you to plow through enemies and swim where Yoshi would normally sink. The series' trademark secrets also return, as Yoshi's Crafted World encourages exploration to find collectibles and hidden areas. As you explore, you need to keep your eyes open for Smiley Flowers and different coins. Certain stages require you to search for hiding Poochy pups. Once you draw them out, you must chase them down before they escape and find another hiding spot. Several secrets also pop up in the background, so making a habit of looking past your Yoshi is a good idea. In addition, you can choose to play through stages' flipsides, opening new possibilities in exploration.

You also collect costumes for Yoshi. These go beyond the cosmetic skins you unlocked in Yoshi's Woolly World; they are full-fledged costumes that change Yoshi's shape, appearance, and stats. One such costume is shaped like a macaron, providing damage protection while giving Yoshi a puffy, pink top layer.

You can also add a second local player to the journey. While cooperative play can make any platformer more chaotic, Yoshi's Crafted World allows players to jump on each other's backs to minimize accidents during tough sequences. When the Yoshis are together, their abilities like egg throw and ground pound are also more powerful.

Yoshi's Crafted World looks to carry on the colorful dinosaur's tradition of cute adventures that mix fun platforming with rewarding exploration. We won't know until late March just how many secrets await us in this handcrafted world, but if it's anything like past entries, we're excited to see just how creative the team at Good Feel can get. » **Brian Shea**



gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Kingdom Hearts III

Kingdom Hearts III goes all-out with massive spectacle, and it pays off. This long-awaited entry provides satisfying answers to most lingering questions, but it also puts the series on a promising new path. The action-packed combat is a thrill thanks to the addition of keyblade transformations, using attractions as attacks, and teaming up with beloved Disney characters for powerful specials. With heartwarming character moments, new worlds, and memorable boss battles, Kingdom Hearts III is a major evolution, but it also doesn't ditch what made fans fall in love in the first place.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Corn on the crab.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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4A GAMES

DEEP SILVER

Resident Evil 2

The greater of two evils

9.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Revive Capcom's classic survival horror game with more than a visual overhaul. This feels like a new game that plays homage to the original – not a classic with a new coat of paint

» Graphics
Its new third-person perspective and detailed 3D environments bring Racoon City's police department to life like never before

» Sound
The soundtrack is subtle but effective. However, creaking floorboards and other ambient effects do an even better job creating an uncomfortable atmosphere

» Playability
RE 2's action is slow-paced but intense; the environmental puzzles are clever and never grow frustrating

» Entertainment
For Resident Evil fans this is a must-play, but even those without nostalgia for RE 2 will have a good time

» Replay Value
High

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** January 25 **Rating** M

For more than a decade, Resident Evil has felt like a franchise struggling to find its identity. The seminal Resident Evil 4 put a greater focus on action, but subsequent entries lost their luster. Resident Evil 7 was a major course correction but still felt like a radical reinvention that was finding its footing. Fortunately, Capcom might have finally found the magic once again. This brilliant homage to Resident Evil 2 not only revitalizes many of the survival horror elements that put Resident Evil on the map, it paves a brilliant path for the future of the franchise.

In its era, Resident Evil 2 was the pinnacle of survival horror. While the original Resident Evil established a formula, its sequel raised the stakes in nearly every way with tense exploration and nail-biting action. In 1998, Resident Evil 2's action was as intense as its atmosphere was horrifying, so it became a benchmark for PS One horror. Unfortunately, Capcom's classic has aged about as poorly as a zombie-eaten corpse.

Capcom's remake gives Racoon City a much-needed facelift, but a new third-person perspective does even more to update Resident Evil's action. This remake returns to the series' slower-paced roots. Thankfully, slowing down the shootouts doesn't diminish Resident Evil's intensity. On the contrary, Resident Evil's action feels better than it has in years, and its smooth shooter controls are incredibly intuitive. Zombies shamble forward like herky-jerky wind-up toys. These animations are unnerving, but they also create an exciting metagame in which you must time your shots perfectly to hit these brain eaters in the brainpan. If you miss your shot, they keep stumbling forward, meaning that even two flanking zombies can pose a challenge if you're off your A-game.

Resident Evil 2's new visuals also create a darker, more haunting vibe. For those who think Resident Evil has lost its teeth, Resident Evil 2 might be the most intense game in the series. The original Resident Evil 2's bold colors look cartoonish today, but the remake's atmosphere is foreboding. Zombie heads pop in a sickening shower of brain bits. Grotesque body horrors skitter across the walls and ceilings. The station's halls echo with steady footfalls. I normally have an incredibly steady hand, but Resident Evil 2 had me jumping at shadows, and I couldn't escape the feeling of being stalked.

Resident Evil 2 is also much more than a remake. In a lot of important ways, this feels like a brand-new experience. Fans will recognize locations within Racoon City's police department and its sprawling sewer system, but Capcom cleverly reworked the entire layout so they feel fresh. Many of the environmental puzzles are more realistic, and moments like rewiring an electrical grid or looking for environmental clues to a combination lock offer a refreshing break from the action.

Another big change from the original game is the removal of the zapping system. In the PlayStation original, players' actions with one character could affect events in a second playthrough with the other character. While the zapping system is gone, this modern update has a mode called 2nd Run, which allows you to play through the campaign a second time with the other character. These two campaigns don't talk to each other as in the PlayStation game, but 2nd Run challenges you to take a different path through the station and gives you a few new tools to use in the process, such as a rapid-fire revolver that burns through high-grade ammo. Leon and Claire's stories are also very different, so this feature adds extra incentive to play through the game a second time. Fortunately, both playthroughs felt significantly different, and I was excited to see what happened to both protagonists.

Over the years, Capcom has experimented with several different approaches to Resident Evil, but this is one approach I hope gets revisited. Resident Evil 2 not only looks great, it plays well, and it forces you into a series of dark encounters that are a total rush. Resident Evil is finally running on all cylinders. » **Ben Reeves**

Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown

A worthy throwback

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Project Aces **Release** January 18 **Rating** T

Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown is an adrenaline-filled thrill ride that soars high with excellently crafted dogfights, responsive controls, and payloads large enough to crack the planet in half. As your fighter rips through a narrow canyon in pursuit of a bogey with a death wish, Ace Combat 7 delivers top-tier intensity. In these moments, the music swells, your wingmen scream for immediate success, and if your rocket hits the mark, you feel like Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star. The battles often culminate in exciting and nerve-wracking ways, but not without some turbulence.

Developer Project Aces taps into the latest military technology to introduce new planes and more potent adversarial forces for the series, but the overall game design resembles an old warbird that feels like it's going to shake apart before it reaches the runway. The missions, their pacing, and the rewards they bring leave much to be desired. The game is designed to be a throwback to the glory days of the series, drawing heavily from the gameplay direction of Ace Combat 5: The Unsung War. While honing in on what made combat great in that title, missions have a lot of downtime, and objectives like scoring challenges feel like filler activities in between the meaningful dogfights.

When you are engaged with rival ace pilots, different weather conditions often up the challenge; you may need to dart into the clouds of a raging storm to trail an adversary. This affects visibility conditions, and your plane gets batted around by strong winds – maybe even struck by lightning. When this happens, the electrical surge scrambles the HUD, making targeting and tracking enemies more difficult. It's a little annoying to lose targeting, as it seems like it comes down to the random chance of a lightning blast, but it ups the chaos and makes you panic – it's effective.

The dogfighting mechanics are Wright-brothers-old in terms of gameplay design, but are still reliable, dynamic, and all about outsmarting your foe. After highlighting an enemy, the dance of positioning begins, with a large green arrow telling you which way to fly. To an onlooker, this may look ineffective at times, as your plane appears to be looping aimlessly, but the goal is to line up behind your adversary as close as possible for a quick rocket blast that can't be evaded with flares. This process is as challenging as it is thrilling. As you spin through the air, you and your adversary exchange lock-on warnings before one of you eventually lands a shot.

Yes, you square off against rival aces, but the biggest threat comes from drones, which can turn on a dime and are not affected by g-forces. These new threats are tied to a complicated story that once again sees the Osean Federation locked in war with the Kingdom of Erusea. The Ace Combat series has told great stories in the past, but this is not one of them. It begins as a fascinating tale about a mechanic struggling to find her place in her family's shadow, but quickly becomes a preposterous journey of prisoners being forced to fly fighter jets to save the world. It plays out like a The Fast and the Furious story that is trying to be touching and serious, but it just doesn't mesh. I ended up laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it all, but yes, it does make for some silly fun.

Over the course of the 20 story-based missions, you earn credits to purchase aircraft, weapons, and upgrades, but you can't freely pick what you want. You need to purchase items along paths that make up a sprawling, spiderweb-like store. If you see a plane you want, you may have to buy some stuff you don't desire just to reach it. This design keeps the balance in check, as souped-up craft are at the ends of the paths, but it creates the problem of the using the same vehicle for numerous missions in a row, as you likely can't afford other planes that will make a difference when you need them. The series was better off when it handed out planes as rewards for progress and kills.

You can earn additional money by venturing into multiplayer, which includes an eight-player battle royal mode (no, not “royale,” but it is everyone against everyone). Taking on other players is a test of skill, but almost every one of my matches ended with no one being downed. The player that dealt the most damage ended up winning. Part of the problem is a five-minute time limit, but it mostly comes down to the evasion and dogfighting tactics being damn good and players knowing how to survive. The homing capabilities of missiles definitely could use a boost here, as the matches end up going nowhere.

For fans of this long-running series, this is the Ace Combat we've known and loved for decades, and it's great to have it back. The dogfighting is rightfully the highlight and will give your reflexes a good workout.

» **Andrew Reiner**

8

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
A thrilling continuation of a series that hasn't had a mainline installment in 12 years

» **Graphics**
The aircraft are highly detailed, and the settings that have sci-fi inspirations look great. Trees and buildings occasionally pop in

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is all over the place, bouncing between choirs belting out doomsday tones and guitars playing upbeat melodies.

» **Playability**
Even on the advanced settings, the controls are arcade-like and designed to keep the action simple

» **Entertainment**
The game makes you work for each kill, and as a result you feel like you've achieved something notable with almost every ace you down

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The VR Vomit Comet

The PlayStation 4 version comes with an exclusive PlayStation VR mode that makes no concessions in how the game is played. Rotation speeds are virtually the same, meaning you're going to feel it. Using head movement to help track enemy vessels is pretty damn cool, and the sensation of movement is wild – especially when spinning or flying close to the ground. The entire game cannot be played in VR, and the headset is only used for a unique mini campaign. The VR aspect isn't a selling point, but if you do have the headset already, it is worth checking out for the sensation of hitting extreme Gs. Just make sure you have a barf bag nearby.

Kingdom Hearts III

A main attraction worth waiting for

9.5

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH
gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** January 29 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept
Visit Disney worlds with Sora and company to put a stop to Xehanort's evil deeds

» Graphics
With detailed environments and character models, the series looks better than ever. The Disney worlds are especially impressive, matching the movies they represent wonderfully

» Sound
Main composer Yoko Shimomura's ability to capture Kingdom Hearts' emotional essence shines here yet again. The classic Disney music helps bring each world to life, and watching Sora explore Frozen while "Let It Go" plays makes me grin

» Playability
The action-based combat is easy to learn, but has enough depth to keep you engaged. Multiple difficulty levels let players of all skill levels get into the action, but the previous story threads aren't as easy to follow

» Entertainment
With higher stakes, Kingdom Hearts III is a lot of spectacle in the best way possible. It isn't afraid to go big, but it also doesn't forget what made fans fall in love in the first place

» Replay Value
Moderate

If Disney has taught us anything, it's to believe in magic. The company's partnership with Square Enix may have seemed unlikely 17 years ago, but Kingdom Hearts became a phenomenon with a dedicated fanbase that remained invested in a sprawling story spanning eight entries and multiple consoles. Now, Kingdom Hearts III finally takes the next major step in that journey, giving fans what we've been waiting for: resolution. The new installment addresses threads that have been left hanging for years, and it does so by leveraging the Disney magic that seems to make anything possible. The result is the series at its strongest, and most importantly, it provides satisfying answers to its biggest question marks.

The story is a dream come true for devoted fans. Kingdom Hearts III explores plot points that wind through 358/2 Days, Birth by Sleep, Re:coded, and more; the narrative picks up where Dream Drop Distance left off, with Sora attempting to regain and enhance his lost power to stand a chance against Xehanort. So much has happened to so many different characters in the franchise, and spotting these familiar faces in Kingdom Hearts III and learning what they've been up to is exciting and makes the years of investment feel worthwhile. Like many fans, I've been wondering the fate of beloved characters, such as Aqua, Roxas, and Naminé. Kingdom Hearts III takes these arcs in intriguing and surprising directions, while also providing some closure. Let's just say there are some cool scenes that still stick out in my mind, especially after waiting nearly a decade to see if Birth by Sleep's Aqua, Ventus, and Terra would ever be reunited.

As much as I enjoyed the tale, newcomers (and even old fans who have just missed a few entries) will probably have a hard time following many portions. A memory archive in the menu provides short videos to get you up to speed or refresh your memory, but they're not comprehensive. As a result, this is not a good place to jump into the series, but it remains rewarding for those who are already invested.

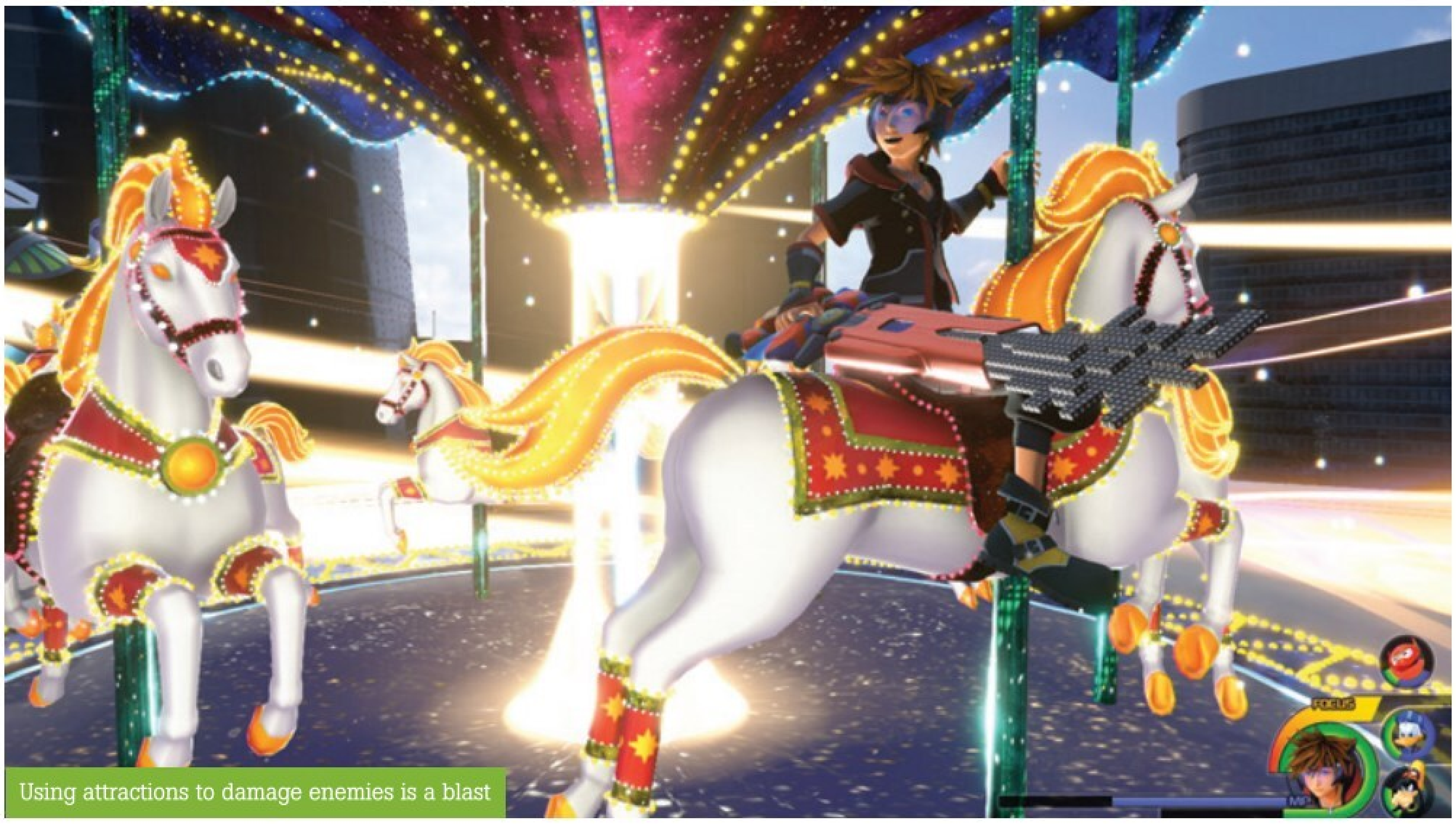
In terms of gameplay, everything that worked in previous entries is on display here. The action-packed combat is fast and fluid, testing your twitch skills and ability to recognize attack patterns. The battlefields are chaotic, which can be overwhelming, but the arsenal of options you have to eliminate foes is staggering. Chaining combos becomes extremely rewarding with keyblade transformations, which let your weapon turn into various implements, including everything from dual pistols to yo-yos. Do enough damage and attack an enemy when a green indicator flashes, and you can use iconic Disney attractions, like the mad tea cups and pirate ship, to take down enemies in a jiffy. This doesn't even tap into the special attacks you can do with your party members, such as flinging Goofy at enemies or riding a rocket

Rabbit needs help with his garden

with Buzz and Woody to ram your enemies. Incidentally, after being away from Donald and Goofy for the last few entries, having them at your side again feels great.

Your ability to move through the world is impressive, especially with the increased verticality. Expect to climb up plenty of walls. Flowmotion still lets you swing around poles and air slide off walls for bursts of speed to damage enemies and Shotlock also returns, allowing you to lock on to multiple baddies and stream projectiles. Using all the special ways to attack in concert makes you feel powerful. The only thing missing was a sense of growing power from the new abilities gained by leveling up. In the past, a new magic, attack, or counter would make a significant difference. That's mostly tied to the keyblades now, as you upgrade them and open up more advanced transformations, so Sora's personal progression feels less impactful.

Visiting popular Disney worlds and interacting with these iconic characters has been a signature aspect of the series, and this entry does not disappoint. Each world incorporates new gameplay elements that feel distinct. In the Toy Story world, you can jump into toy mechs, using your robot arms to punch and shoot lasers at foes. The Pirates of the Caribbean world lets you engage in ship battles (similar to certain Assassin's Creed games) where you must brace for impact and fire off cannons to take down ships in the distance. For the majority of Big Hero Six, you're traversing high buildings and battling in the air. That was all fun, but not every world is a winner. I wasn't a big fan of Tangled and its repetitive forests and silly dancing minigame. I also hated when I was forced to go on silly little fetch quests, like collecting 300 crabs for Jack Sparrow, or searching for all of Olaf's hidden body parts in Frozen. But even with those frustrations, the expanded size and scope of the worlds in Kingdom Hearts III makes this the best and most varied collection of destinations in the franchise. Even the graphics are impressive for how close they mimic the films, right down to Pixar's clear and exaggerated style to the live-action realism of the Pirates of the Caribbean.



Using attractions to damage enemies is a blast

The Gummi Ship is also back as your main transportation between worlds. If you've played the series, you probably already know how you feel about it. It's polarizing, and Kingdom Hearts III does nothing to change your mind. You can customize the ship more than ever before (my favorite part) and have greater flexibility in going off the beaten path for treasure spheres and other discoveries. However, it still feels like busywork – an obstacle you have to get through to get to the main attraction.

Kingdom Hearts III does have some minor disappointments. The extra content is of uneven quality, like minigames sometimes being too simplistic for their own good. I also wasn't fond of the repetitive boss battles toward the end, since repeatedly facing similar foes is a tedious way to drag out the finale. Also, though I had fun spotting nods to Final Fantasy littered throughout the worlds, that popular franchise's presence has been reduced to a very minor role. The lessening of Final Fantasy cameos didn't impact my enjoyment, but the characters don't play a role in the main story. That doesn't mean they won't show up in some of the optional content, but the days of fighting alongside heroes like Aerith and Auron appear to be over.

While not perfect, Kingdom Hearts III is the game I've been waiting for. After finishing it, I was delighted by how satisfied I was with the journey. I traversed worlds with some of my favorite Disney characters, persevered through challenging boss battles, and saw a triumphant finale that only makes me more excited for the future. The series still has a lot of heart, and that's what makes it so endearing.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

Chip and Dale are back to help you with the Gummi Ship

Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

Returning to bat country

8.25

Switch

» Concept
Return to the world of No More Heroes in a side story that's smaller in scope and offers a different flavor of weird

» Graphics
Characters, bosses, and levels have a lightly cel-shaded style that looks dated, but the stylistic trappings that permeate the game more than make up for them

» Sound
Some neat remixes of the No More Heroes theme are the highlight of the soundtrack, which mostly sticks to standard synth and boom-bap loops

» Playability
Combat is fairly simple and can occasionally be frustrating, but the emphasis on crowd control and skill combos keeps things interesting for most of the campaign

» Entertainment
Travis Strikes Again returns to the more stylish tendencies of early Grasshopper Manufacture, with decent combat elevated by a strong sense of style and writing

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Grasshopper Manufacture, Nintendo **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture **Release** January 18 **Rating** Mature

Although Goichi Suda has had his name on most of developer Grasshopper Manufacture's output, Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes is billed as his return to the director's chair for the first time since the original No More Heroes. Although Travis Strikes Again is smaller in scope than most recent Grasshopper titles, it's a confident return to the wilder side that made the studio famous, in both its rough edges and its willingness to venture into strange places.

Travis Touchdown is looking for the six mysterious Death Balls, a collection of game cartridges for an obscenely rare and deadly console called the Death Drive Mark II. The Death Balls are said to grant one wish to whoever collects and beats them all, and Bad Man, whose daughter Travis killed in the first No More Heroes, hopes to revive her. As Travis and Bad Man team up to descend into the world of each Death Drive game, they find the games corrupted by bugs and taken over by Juvenile, an eccentric game developer with a sordid history. The plot functions more as a vehicle for cool moments than anything else, but those moments are pulled off with aplomb.

While the setup implies each game will be vastly different, they all use the same hack-and-slash combat as their base. Fights move quickly, with a mix of crowd-controlling fodder enemies and zeroing in on stronger enemies that require a little more finesse to take down. Early encounters are a bit mindless as you learn how to maneuver and execute different attacks, but later encounters required me to think more critically about how I approached them.

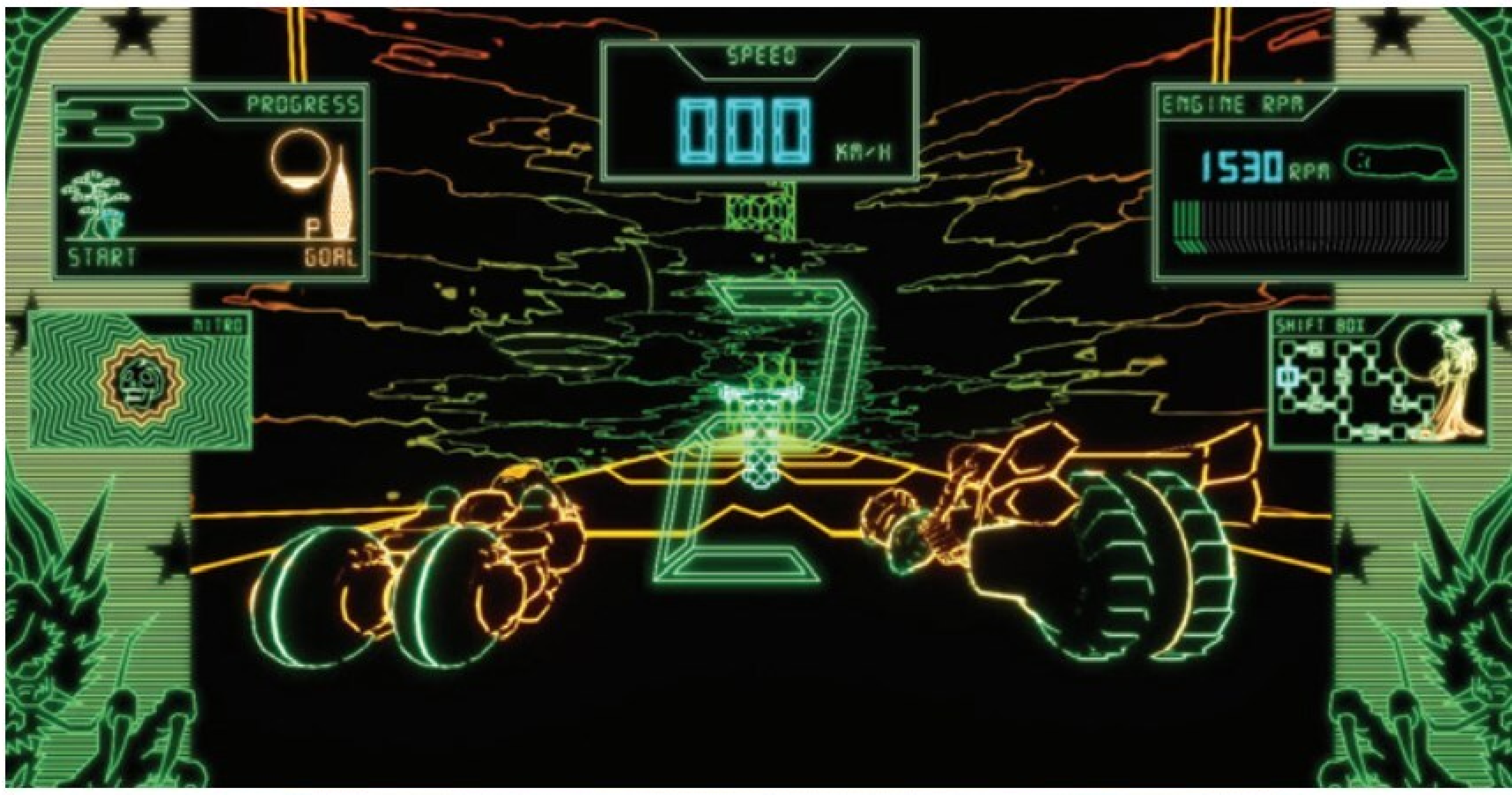
You also find a number of equippable skills that let you tailor Travis or Bad Man to your liking, adding an interesting layer to combat. While I wound up with a couple of staples, I regularly came up with combos I thought were unbeatable (like dropping a time-slowing field to set up a guided laser that took a few seconds to fire), only to swap them out after facing a boss or fight that kept me on my toes. It's not as intricate or engaging as other action games, but each level introduces just enough twists to keep things fun, even as the enemy and combat encounters taper off near the end.

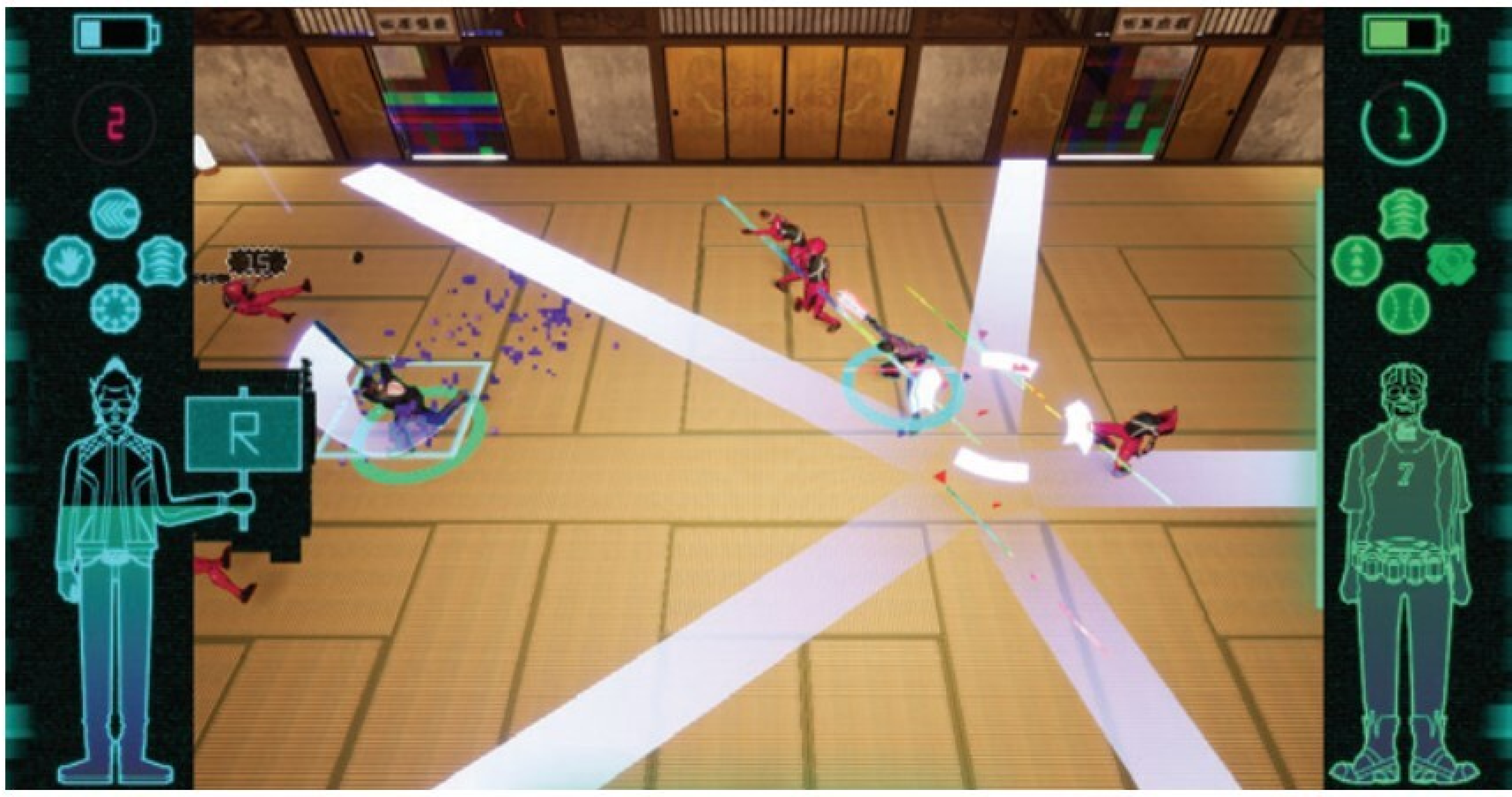
You can also play the entire game in co-op to make things easier, but unfortunately my partner and I kept finding ourselves offscreen since the view doesn't zoom out to keep up with the action.

What makes Travis Strikes Again shine, however, is how it brims with style, and how it uses its combat as a jumping off point for some cool aesthetic touches and setpieces. In one game, you fight through waves of enemies in order to get parts for a motorcycle, which you then use to compete in drift races with vector-graphics. Another pays homage to the original Resident Evil, with a mansion foyer acting as a central hub. And without spoiling too much, things only get weirder and more referential from there.

Between levels, you learn how Travis acquires each new Death Ball by reading through a retro visual novel, which has its own share of references and surprises. You can also explore Travis' trailer, reading blog entries about the different kinds of ramen you eat throughout the game, buying and wearing different T-shirts (most of which feature logos for various indie games like Undertale, Hyper Light Drifter, and Hotline Miami), and reading short magazine spreads with fun write-ups of every game and a few cheat codes, both real and fake. Although these segments are relatively minor, they made for a great distraction and doubled as a change of pace from the combat.

Travis Strikes Again finds a good balance between fun, approachable action and reveling in Suda51 and Grasshopper's signature style. It's not the most intricate action game out there, but the simple combat works well as a vessel for several one-off moments that elevate it above its simple premise. It's more of a prelude than a main event, but both on its own and as a sign of things to come, Travis Strikes again is a promising return to form. **» Suriel Vazquez**





Etrian Odyssey Nexus

A fond farewell

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** February 5 **Rating** T

The Etrian Odyssey series is a bastion for those seeking a classic dungeon-crawling experience, hearkening back to legacy titles like Wizardry. As the final entry on 3DS, Etrian Odyssey Nexus is a franchise homage, allowing players to dive in as a variety of classes from across the series while exploring many of the same dungeons and monsters pulled from its history. The experience is packed with content and even has an awesome new class, but is weighed down by heavy recycling of monsters and dungeons from past games.

One of the highlights of Nexus is the new class, hero. Borderline overpowered and tons of fun, this class does it all. It's a front-liner that can dish out massive damage, land area-of-effect abilities, and even heal the party. By creating images of itself, the hero class can vastly alter a battle and is a shoo-in for any team; everyone should try one of these aptly named characters in their build. Outside of that, players can pick from a staggering assortment of various classes from throughout the franchise, including favorites that aren't very good at fighting, but are great for farming and exploring. You have no shortage of choices for creating a party, and an experience-share item obtained early in the game allows you to keep a backup roster in the mix should you ever want to change things up.

Nexus offers a wealth of dungeons, but the vast majority of them have been ripped from other Etrian games – monsters, bosses, and all. I did a double take as I entered the Lush Woodlands and backed out of the game to make sure I hadn't accidentally booted up Etrian Odyssey V. While layouts have been changed and some enemies moved, it all feels too familiar and rehashed. On the plus side, Nexus has more areas to explore than any other title in the series, so hungry adventurers will find their cups running over in main dungeons, side dungeons, and FOE (boss-style roaming monsters) hunts. I was happy for the breadth of content and the ways I could approach it, but ultimately disappointed that Nexus relies so heavily on material from previous games.

The core loop of leveling up, selling items, and crafting new gear is as satisfying as ever. Automapping options are perfect for players who don't want to manually draw every wall as they move from tile to tile, and getting a spectacular new weapon from some FOE parts feels great. The same core systems from other titles in the franchise remain, such as picking up optional quests at the tavern, turning in completed maps at HQ, and meeting NPCs inside the dungeons to help with various situations. Nexus offers the barest framework of a story to justify the endless grinding romp, but the thin narrative keeps players focused on what the adventure does well.

Etrian Odyssey Nexus has a ton of things to do, but I've done them all before. While this shouldn't shake off fans of the series from diving in to its last handheld entry, the love letter to the franchise can feel uninspired with its recreations of the past. Even for a series built on a classic and time-tested formula for dungeon crawling, Nexus relies too heavily on the substance of its predecessors. » **Daniel Tack**

8

3DS

» Concept
Form a party and explore numerous stages in a classic dungeon-crawling format

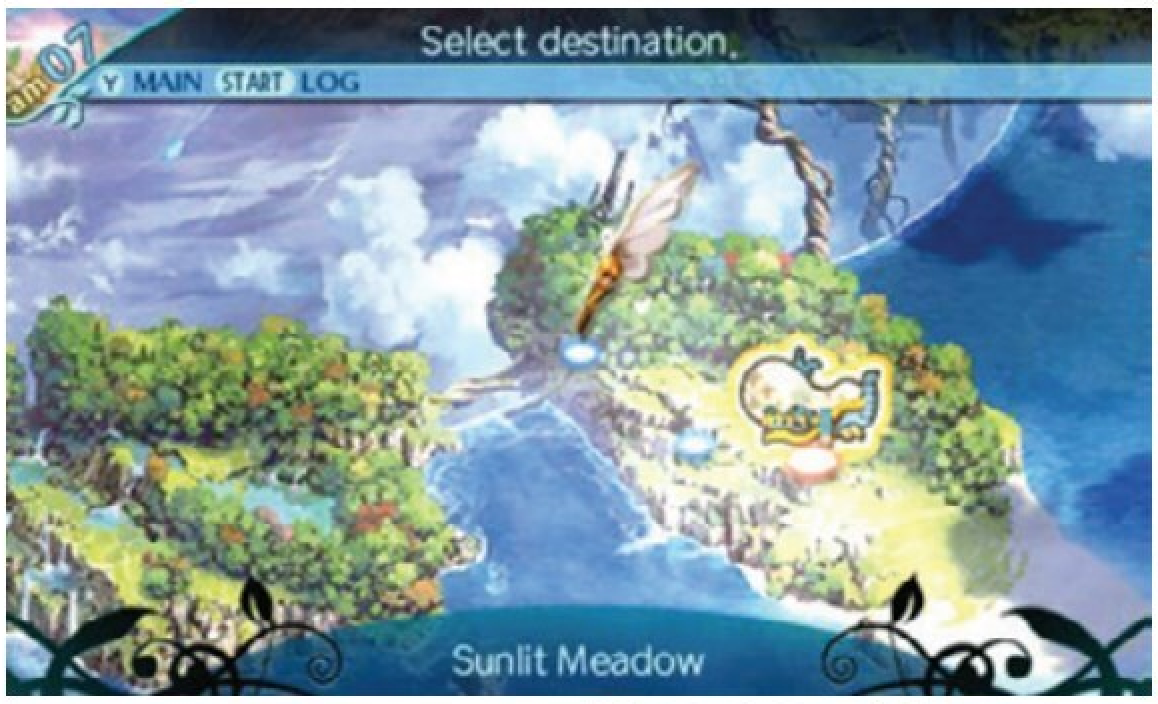
» Graphics
Crisp and clean, the series' visuals haven't changed a bit

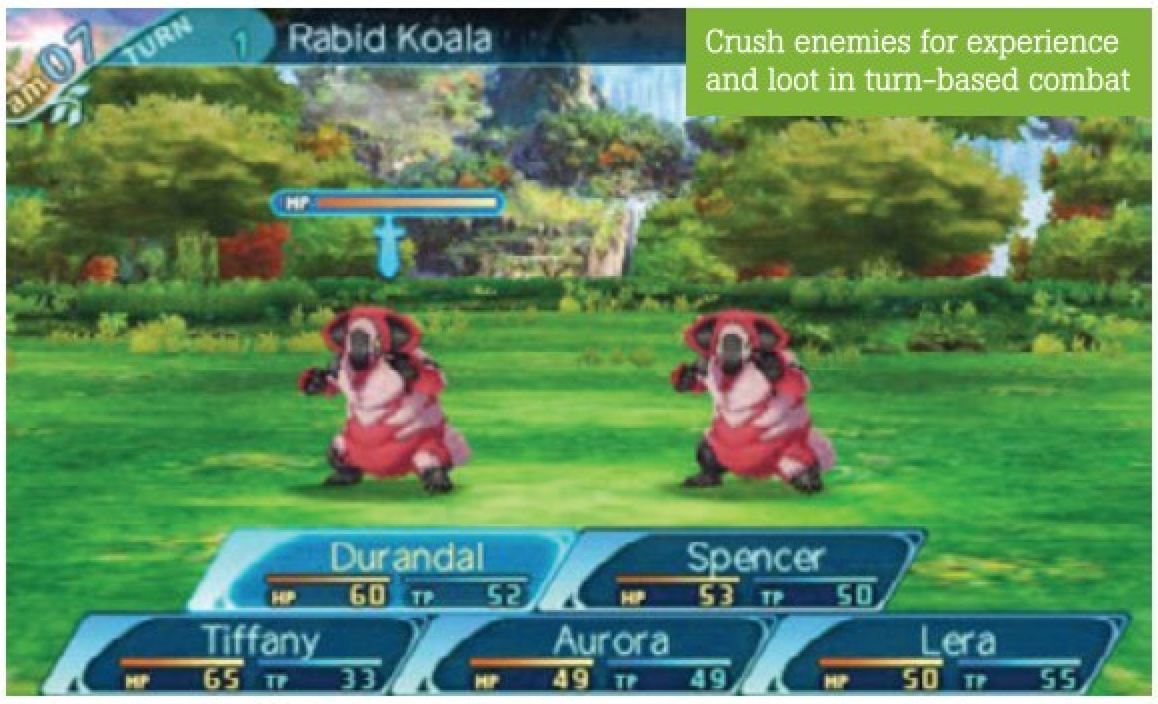
» Sound
Effects accurately convey spells, slashes, and situations that call for increased awareness

» Playability
While the vast array of options can be daunting for newcomers, a "picnic" difficulty mode helps cater to all levels of experience

» Entertainment
Nexus relies too heavily on the past, but it's ultimately a satisfying conclusion to the 3DS franchise of dungeon crawlers

» Replay Value
Moderate





Crush enemies for experience and loot in turn-based combat

The final installment for the 3DS embraces dungeons, monsters, and more from the entirety of the franchise

6.5 The Eternal Castle Remastered

Platform PC **Release** January 5 **Rating** NR

I left my time with The Eternal Castle Remastered extremely impressed by its aesthetic achievements but more than a little let down by how much the gameplay feels like a chore. The quality of its visuals are undeniable, but sometimes it's better leaving certain things, like clunky controls, in the past. **– Javy Gwaltney**

7 Life Is Strange 2: Episode 2 – Rules

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** January 24 **Rating** M

Sean and Daniel continue to be engaging, evolving characters with dire circumstances, but Rules' lackluster supporting cast and unexciting scenarios bring disappointing consequences. **– Elise Favis**

8.5 Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey

Platform 3DS **Release** January 11 **Rating** E

If you've never played Bowser's Inside Story, this is a fantastic way to experience what is probably the best of the Mario & Luigi games. As a remake, it doesn't drastically change the experience or improve on it in a big way, but that's a testament to the original's quality more than it is a knock against this version. **– Kyle Hilliard**

8.5 New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe

Platform Switch **Release** January 11 **Rating** E

Toadette is a good addition for less-experienced players, and she makes some of the star coins easier to reach. While I'm disappointed that this release doesn't include more additions to the original package, New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe is still a great game at its core. **– Brian Shea**

8 At The Gates

Platform PC • Mac **Release** January 23 **Rating** NR

The slow pacing, difficulty, and confined historical focus might prove a barrier for some, but I loved carving out my own empire of riches in the roughs on grit and determination alone. **– Javy Gwaltney**

8.25 Bury Me, My Love

Platform Switch **Release** January 10 **Rating** E10+

Bury Me, My Love doesn't just effectively humanize Syrians trying to escape, but also puts a spotlight on those left behind. Through realistically written messages and occasional photos, you empathize with a couple's bleak reality in a story that is as tragic as it is inspiring. **– Elise Favis**

6.75 Vane

Platform PS4 **Release** January 15 **Rating** E10+

Vane feels like an indescribable fever dream when it works, relaying a wordless story about a transforming creature trying to figure out its place in a world that appears to be falling apart. Too often, though, bugs and a lack of clear direction reminded me Vane could have used a little bit of extra development time for polish. **– Kyle Hilliard**

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Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk	8.5	Dec-18
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Life is Strange 2: Episode 1 – Roads	8.25	Dec-18
Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories, The	8	Dec-18
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Timespinner	7.75	Dec-18

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Battlefield V	8	Jan-19
Below	7.5	Feb-19
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Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	9.5	Dec-18
Council, The	6.5	Feb-19
Darksiders III	8	Jan-19
Desert Child	6	Feb-19
Destiny 2: Forsaken	9.25	Nov-18
Fallout 76	6	Jan-19
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Soulcalibur VI	8.75	Dec-18
Spyro Reignited Trilogy	8.5	Jan-19
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8	Dec-18

SWITCH

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Two Point Hospital	7.5	Nov-18
Wandersong	7	Dec-18

VITA

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Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight	7	Jan-19
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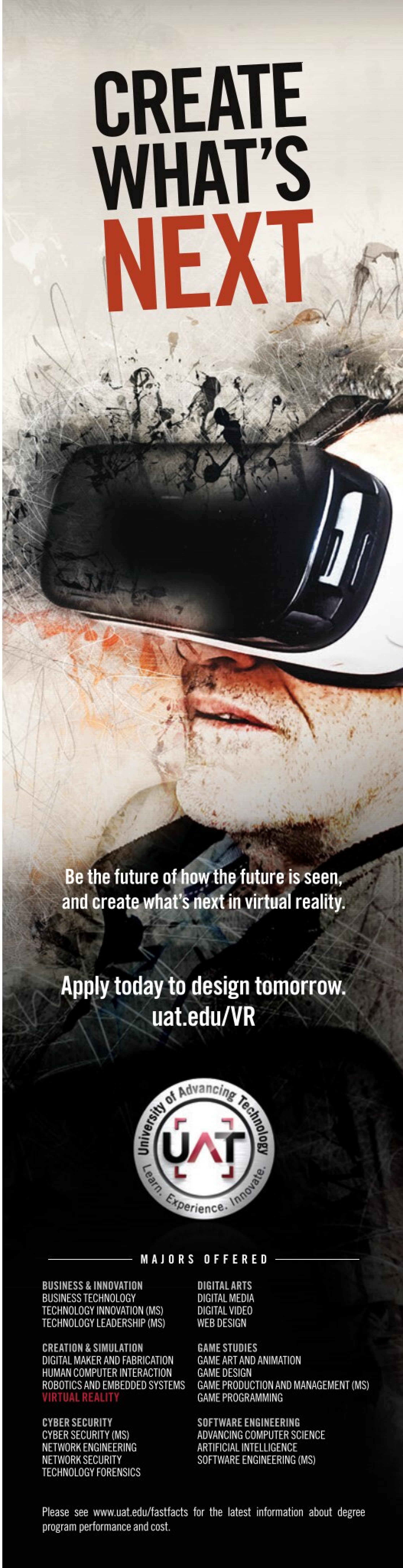

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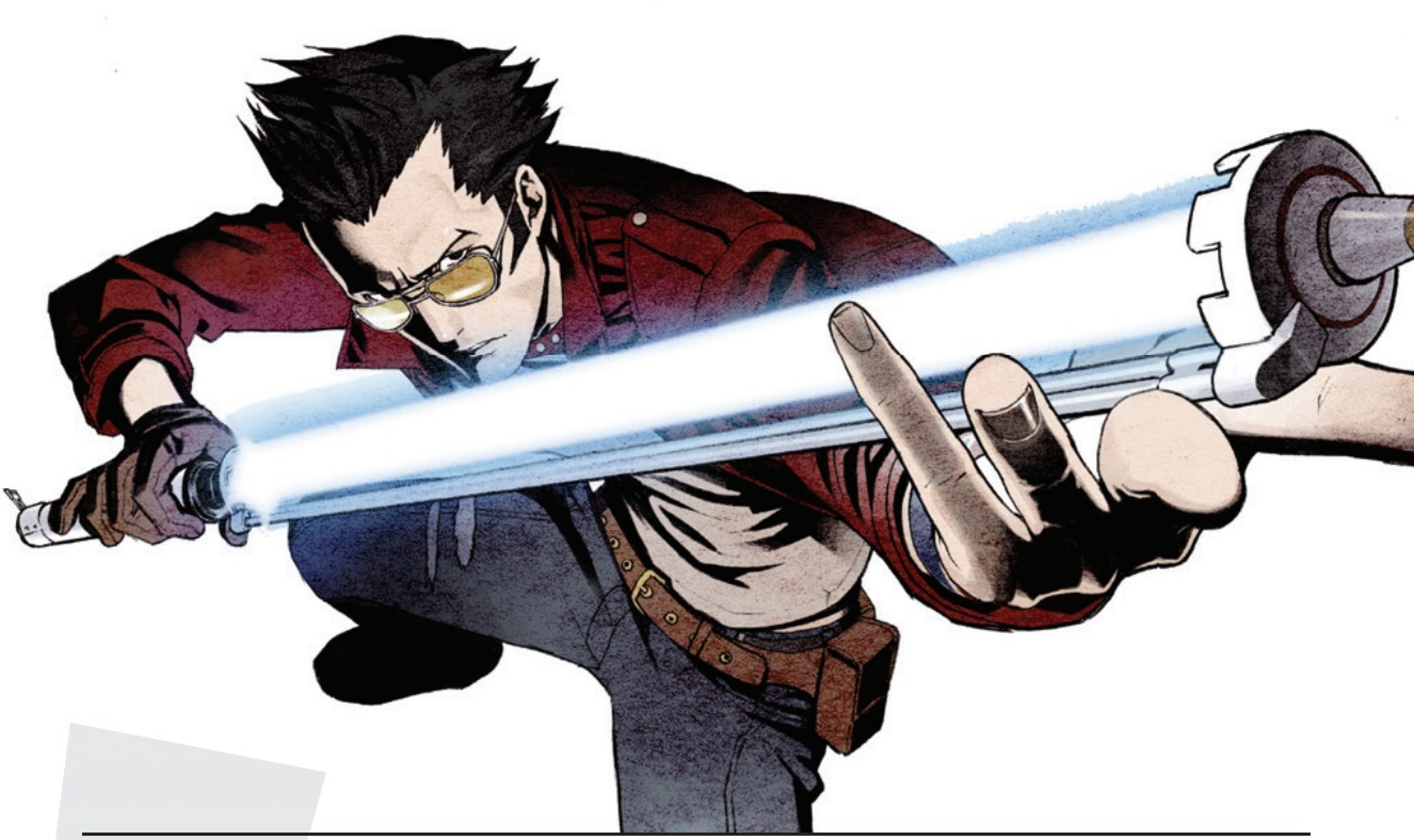

Freak Meets Geek

How Goichi Suda let loose his inner nerd on the Wii with No More Heroes

In the heyday of the Nintendo Wii, as hardcore and casual fans alike crowded department stores for a chance to snag one of the massively popular consoles, developers were eager to cash in on its expanded audience. Major game publishers rushed to produced hackneyed minigame compilations, dancing games, and other shovelware. Goichi Suda, however, had other plans. The moment Suda, CEO of Japanese game developer Grasshopper Manufacture, saw the Wii's motion-sensing remote, he knew what he wanted to do with it: make people jerk it around suggestively. "It was the first thing that sprung to mind," he says.

by Suriel Vazuez

Grasshopper Manufacture had long been making off-kilter games like The Silver Case and Flower, Sun, and Rain, but had only made minor waves in the West with the release of Killer7. With the Wii proving as popular as it was, Suda saw a chance to bring his eccentric style to a new audience.

Originally in development for the Xbox 360 as "Heroes," Suda decided to make No More Heroes a Wii exclusive. "As soon as I saw [the Wii], I said, 'This is it, it's got to be this,'" he says. "So we talked to [publisher Marvelous Entertainment] and they shifted development over to the Wii."

Suda also wanted to create something entirely different from his previous work, moving away from the serious and narrative-heavy games of Grasshopper's past. Around that time, Grasshopper had dipped its toes into the action genre, creating two licensed games based on the *Samurai Champloo* and *Blood+* animes. This gave the studio a good starting point when it began work on No More Heroes, a game that would cement Suda as one of Japan's most eccentric game developers.

One of No More Heroes' defining traits is its loving references to both pop culture and obscure oddities alike. Chief among them is Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, which stood out to Suda not just for its visual aesthetic, but for its titular protagonist, whose determination Suda admired. "He goes on this journey and essentially he does whatever it takes to win, whether it's considered cowardly, or unfair, he does what it takes," Suda says.

Travis Touchdown, No More Heroes' spunky protagonist (who bears a striking, intentional resemblance to *Jackass* star Johnny Knoxville), shares a similar determination, but under very different circumstances. After buying a beam katana from an online auction site, he decides to put it to use by killing Helter Skelter, the eleventh-highest ranked assassin on the United Assassins Association leaderboard. With the help of the UAA's Sylvia Christel, Travis sets out to make it to the top of the rankings, another element inspired by *El Topo*.

Despite the absurdity of the premise, Suda wanted to create a character players could relate to. At the time of No More Heroes' development, gaming had been stocked with buff, macho protagonists, the kind that fueled power fantasies but were hard to empathize with. Although Travis' main goal is to become the world's best assassin, Suda wanted players to see part of themselves in him. To do that, he infused the game with even more pop culture ephemera. Travis is an avowed anime and wrestling nerd.

HIGH
LOW
BAR
7

His walls are lined with posters of fake animes and luchador masks, the latter of which unlock grapples and throws as you collect them.

Travis spends most of his time in Santa Destroy, a small West Coast city based on San Diego. Suda chose the setting because he appreciated the stark contrast between light and dark the city evokes. "The sunlight [there] is really bright, and that sunlight is able to create these really dark shadows," Suda says. "But even though the shadows are really dark and black, it's not a dark game, so it's finding this balance of the bright and the vibes of the West Coast with the gameplay style."

In order to make his way up the leaderboard of the world's best assassins, Travis must work part-time jobs (which manifest as short minigames) to get the cash necessary to challenge his next opponent. "It's a fundamental part of his character, this idea of having part-time jobs to eat," Suda says. "I wanted it be to like, maybe there's a guy like Travis living next door." Although the team at Grasshopper was at first skeptical about the idea of adding part-time work to an action game, Suda eventually convinced the team it was crucial to Travis' character that he spend time mowing lawns and working at a gas station.

To make all the shiftwork worthwhile however, the assassins at the end of these cycles had to measure up. This also gave Suda another chance to pay homage to things he liked by hiring the people behind them. To make characters with names like Dr. Peace, Destroyman, and Speed Buster stand out, Suda collaborated with a number of acclaimed manga artists, including Yusuke Kozaki (*Speed Grapher*) to design the characters, while Shigeto Koyama (*Eureka Seven*) designed their often outlandish weapons, with Suda offering direction on their design. "I knew from the beginning I wanted Dr. Peace to look like Charles Bronson," Suda tells me.

No More Heroes sold poorly upon in its initial release in Japan, but gained enough critical steam after its release in the West to justify a sequel, despite the game having a definitive ending explicitly stating there wouldn't be one (Sylvia at one point remarks, "Too bad there won't be a sequel!"). For Suda, this was all part of the plan. "I knew I was probably going to make a sequel as I was making it," he says. "So I knew I should probably end it in way that it looked like there probably can't be a sequel, because people would come back and say, 'Hey, I thought there wasn't going to be a sequel!' I thought that'd be a funny thing to do."

Suda would not go on to direct that sequel, Desperate Struggle, as Grasshopper had become large enough to require him to step into a more managerial role as CEO. No More Heroes assistant director Nobutaka Ichiki took the lead on part two. Suda did, however, significantly contribute to Desperate Struggle's design and is listed as "executive director".

Since then, the series remained mostly dormant until the announcement of Travis Strikes Again, a spinoff that continues the series on a smaller scale (Read our review on page 90). If that game does well enough, it's possible the series could pick back up, perhaps prompting the creation of a No More Heroes 3 and once again allowing Suda to unleash all of his disparate influences and tendencies on the masses once again.

The Other Worlds

Not everyone can be an astronaut, but video games have allowed us to explore distant and strange planets for decades. Any gamer has probably spent time on at least a dozen worlds, and over time, all of those alien locations start to blur together. Think you can tell them apart? Then look at the games below and match them to their correct planet. ***by Joe Juba***

---

1. Beyond Good & Evil

2. Chex Quest

3. Gears of War

4. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

5. Lost Planet

6. Mass Effect

7. Metroid 2

8. No Man's Sky

9. Ratchet & Clank

A. Bazoik

B. Virmire

C. Sera

D. SR388

E. Quartu

F. Matt's Dumb Butt Planet

G. Taris

H. Hillys

I. E.D.N. III

Answers: 1:H, 2:A, 3:C, 4:G, 5:I, 6:B, 7:D, 8:F, 9:E

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